

Hyphenating Moses

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Hyphenating Moses

A Postcolonial Exegesis of Identity in Exodus 1:1–3:15

By

Federico Alfredo Roth



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To Jacqueline



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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D.N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BCOT	Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
BDB	Brown, F., S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907
BEB	Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BJS	<i>British Journal of Sociology</i>
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBMH	Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano
ChrC	<i>Christianity in Crisis</i>
CurBS	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
ColBC	Collegeville Bible Commentary
DBI	Dictionary of Biblical Imagery
DSB	Daily Study Bible
DTWT	Dictionary of Third World Theologies
EC	Epworth Commentaries
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ES	Everyone Series
GrS	Grand Street
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J.J. Stamm, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the supervision of M.E.J. Richardson. 2 vols. Leiden, 2001
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JPSTC	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series

<i>Judaism</i>	<i>Judaism</i>
LCHS	Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>List</i>	<i>Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIInpDB	New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville, 2009
<i>Numen</i>	<i>Numen: International Review for the History of Religions</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PWS	Preaching the Word Series
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>Sca</i>	<i>Scriptura</i>
<i>Semeia</i>	<i>Semeia</i>
<i>sjOT</i>	Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
<i>SocT</i>	<i>Social Text</i>
TBC	Torch Bible Commentaries
TBST	The Bible Speaks Today
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UBSHS	United Bible Societies Handbook Series
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WBCom	Westminster Bible Companion
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction: Pitfalls and Possibilities in Exodus

Introduction

Postcolonial criticism is manifested in an extensive variety of disparate disciplines. As a wide-ranging field of inquiry, its intonations range from political science, to feminist theory, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, art, theatre, musicology, sociology, economics, environmentalism and literary studies, to name a few. Those who take shelter under the postcolonial umbrella also represent unique cross-pollinations of these and other similar categories. The tie that binds such dizzying diversity is a concern to examine the given area through the lenses of suspicion and resistance.

To address the comprehensive nature of abusive power, the various postcolonial iterations aim to unearth exploitative ideologies of all stripes. Whether social, political, or economic, all philosophical expressions that seek to suppress, subject, or abuse underprivileged populations are identified, critiqued, and often rejected outright. Consideration is given to the multifaceted relationship of abusive power, in all its forms, by way of a spatial metaphor that speaks in terms of the “center” and the “margins.” Postcolonial criticism examines the unequal distribution of such power existing predominantly between the dominant metropole and those communities that live, or share in the experience of the underclasses, on the peripheries.

The biblical studies expression of postcolonialism offers intriguing opportunities for reading and understanding the Bible. Perhaps the allure of postcolonial biblical criticism stems from its rather fluid and multiform nature. As a wide-ranging sphere of critical inquiry, not only does it begin with an opposition to monolithic methodological procedures, but it also advocates a complexity of interdisciplinary borrowings.

At base, postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to accomplish a pair of indispensable goals. It begins as an analytic task. As a style of inquiry, postcolonial biblical criticism attempts to catalogue the presence of imperialistic impulses, both in the biblical text and in the academy’s appropriation *of* the biblical text. Attention is given to the ways colonialism’s cultural effects have infiltrated biblical passages and have been used to uphold the concerns of elites, both in antiquity and in contemporary settings.

Secondarily, postcolonial biblical criticism endeavors to go beyond simply identifying exegetical imperialism to “decolonizing” both texts and their interpretations through a commitment to disenfranchised groups both in the biblical world and outside of it. One way postcolonial biblical criticism believes

it accomplishes this redress is by offering new readings for familiar passages. These readings seek to recalibrate the goals of biblical analysis in ways that are sensitive to narrative undersides. This manner of reading is done suspiciously. The postcolonial reader is curious to decipher which agendas or groups are served from given textual data and/or exegetical analysis. Postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to show how the disenfranchised (ancient and modern) are worthy of consideration. Additionally, postcolonial biblical criticism considers them key to a full and responsible understanding of the text in question. Ultimately, the goals of postcolonial biblical criticism revolve around the desire to offer counter-narratives that problematize facile readings in order to reveal new possibilities for understanding familiar stories, themes, characters and issues. Perhaps the most familiar of all such texts is the iconic story of the Hebrew exodus.

The Trouble with Interpreting Exodus from the Margins

Latin American liberation theologians in the 1960s and 1970s are rightly credited with invigorating Exodus studies by underscoring the real-world implications of understanding God as liberator. In the wake of Vatican II, Catholic clergy members set out to recapture the significance of Exodus for the sake of the poor by seizing on YHWH's freedom-making revelation, first to a shepherd in the Midian desert, then to a band of immigrants settled on the eastern edges of the Egyptian delta. Liberationists traced YHWH, foundationally, as a justice-maker and life-sustainer. In their assessment, Exodus put forth the image of an ever-present God drawing near to the downtrodden.

For liberationists, the promise of YHWH's presence reverberates throughout the remainder of the First Testament plot, in the life of Jesus, and by extension, in the life of the church beyond. Moreover, theirs was an intensification of typical theological procedures. Rather than remaining in the cloistered conceptual sphere of abstraction—at home in the academic guild—they urged the faithful to also perform tangible, benevolent deeds. Theirs was a theology marked by social action *and* reflection.

While postcolonial biblical criticism owes much of its existence to the pioneering work of liberationists, there is a sense in which it has turned on its maker. Where the book of Exodus is at issue, a hallmark of postcolonial biblical inquiry has been a tendency to subvert liberation's inventory of theological data by reading for the book's dark corners. Postcolonial biblical criticism not only investigates colonial/imperial entanglements within the biblical text, but it also examines and critiques the mainstream exegetical and theological anal-

ysis of elite circles in the West. Resisting the positivistic tenor of liberationists, postcolonialists react against what, to them, routinely looks to be a dangerous, destructive, and ethnocentric deity. With regularity, postcolonialists confront and reject the altruistic God of Judeo-Christian traditions. This opposition is usually accomplished by shifting attention away from the Israelite protagonists and onto the attacked and enslaved Canaanites in the subsequent conquest narrative (full discussion below, in chapter 2).

The apex of the Exodus story, so goes the thinking, is not at all the divine presence entering the tabernacle at the conclusion of the book. Rather, Exodus culminates in the annihilation of foreign enemies called for in the legal corpus and recounted in the opening chapters of Joshua. It is this extermination, postcolonialists argue, that concludes the Exodus narrative, making the land Israel's possession, and thus revealing YHWH's tyrannical identity. Postcolonial biblical criticism investigates the web of social/theological implications that exist in a story where divine promises mean deliverance for some and takeover for others. In short, can YHWH be a liberator if that liberation comes at the expense of Other lives?

Postcolonial biblical critics commonly note how mainline scholars, usually wedded to Euroamerican institutions and their corresponding interests, readily identify with Israel in the story, not with the Canaanites or Transjordanian residents who find themselves embroiled in the Israelite land grab crusade. Postcolonial critics identify ways in which liberation has, paradoxically, tended to ignore the Other by focusing solely on the Hebrew group and refusing to consider enemy nations as worthy of respect, dignity, or complexity. So too, do they critique liberation theology for its one-dimensional appraisal of Exodus's multiple emphases (e.g. women, children, Egyptians, resident aliens, animals, and still others). Postcolonialists identify another unacknowledged incongruity in liberation theology's presentation of Israel, arguing that even modern liberationist interpreters perpetuate stereotypes. The Israelites are consistently homogenized, romanticized, and masculinized in liberation's theological retellings.

Perhaps more disturbing to postcolonialists is liberation theology's inclination to neatly sidestep additionally troubling elements in the storyline. Liberationists are critiqued for the ways in which their writings understate Israel's change in status from oppressed minority to oppressive majority in the unfolding drama. In a manner of speaking, postcolonialists consider Exodus to itself be an occupied text and therefore incapable of articulating a liberating message. While Latin American liberation theology meant for the book to serve as a paradigm for freedom, its appropriation of the narrative has had the opposite effect. This seminal story is believed to reflect the ideological and methodolog-

ical convictions of its mid-century European masters, not those of mistreated groups they were intended for.

Postcolonial critiques have provided an important counterweight by exposing the ways in which liberation theology has been seduced to reflect its imperialist loyalties. Liberation's truncated reading of Exodus is indeed problematic. It has become increasingly clear that liberationists read the tale in idealized, Westernized modes. Liberationist thinking trends toward a simplified presentation of Israel's God. The YHWH of liberation theology is fundamentally committed to freedom making, but hopelessly implicated in colonial structures.

However, postcolonial biblical criticism is not without its faults. Most troubling is the way postcolonialists use the conquest narratives as a trump card for devaluing Exodus altogether. Here their assessments are inclined to be dismissive of Exodus, seeing it as a sinister precursor to the domination of Canaanites in Joshua. These scholars point to the ways in which the story is simply unsuitable for Native American, Aboriginal, and Palestinian readers alike. The text cannot be a resource for the dispossessed of our world if its heroes replay Egyptian dominance by undertaking obliteration campaigns of their own. Postcolonialists have created doubts surrounding the foundational benevolence of YHWH's character. Nonetheless, the unfortunate tendency of postcolonial readings has been to throw Exodus, despite its potentially life-preserving elements, out with the proverbial bathwater. It would seem that postcolonialism's subversive readings are in need of their own subversion.

Both liberation and postcolonial biblical criticism create a decoupage text to serve their ideological needs. Fashionable as it is to read for liberation or to seek textual decolonization, both strategies restrict the story in opposite ways. One hunts after sanguine elements while the other reads only to uncover villainous dimensions. Together these approaches have invaded Exodus, uncritically "colonized" it, and crafted its meaning to fulfill their purposes. Ironically, if liberation has obliterated the non-Hebrew, postcolonial biblical criticism has obliterated other sets of Others, and in turn, undermined its methodological foundations. The simple dichotomies offered by these divergent interpretive programs do not account for the complexity of the material. Given liberation's narrow reading of Exodus, and the allergic response felt by much of current postcolonial biblical scholarship, one wonders if there is a way to redeploy the tenets of the latter in a manner that is more in keeping with its stated goals. Something more nuanced than these artificial extremes is called for.

Redeploying Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: A Middle Way

The bulk of attention within postcolonial biblical criticism is usually reserved for unmasking interpreters by naming their exegetical and/or theological misuses that stem from myopic socio-culturally conditioned reading methodologies. These are often explorations of a given text's reception history and its abusive uses. It is widely agreed that the Bible has been used to foment and authorize colonialism beginning in the early modern period and extending into the phenomenon of today's economic and cultural neocolonial globalization.

The postcolonial enterprise, while important and commendable, has deconstructed Exodus, emptying it of its full vitality. This book aims to move beyond a critique of interpretive history. In hopes of correcting these trajectories of liberation and postcolonial biblical criticism, I will examine Exodus's postcolonial elements at the level of the text itself. The result of this project will be to offer a reading of Exodus's introductory chapters that is unafraid of exploring the often muted motifs and their adjoining implications (in the spirit of postcolonialism), while also being open to retaining and reclaiming a positive portrayal of its characters and themes (in the spirit of liberation). This middle way will show the complexities at work in the opening of Israel's decisive national story. The discussion will locate impulses that highlight contradictions, inconsistencies, unpredictability, paradoxes, and ambivalence, while examining how these elements served the ideological needs of the subaltern Israelite population. Specifically, it is my belief that postcolonial thinking, when more authentically attuned to its stated goals, can be quite helpful for better understanding the intricate theme of identity ideology in the book's initial stories.

The task will be completed in the space of six chapters. Following this introduction, chapter 1, "The Contours of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," traces postcolonialism's materialization in the field of biblical scholarship. The chapter details the features, aims, presuppositions and foundational characteristics comprising postcolonial biblical criticism as understood by its most prominent and sympathetic authors. Considerable attention is paid to the work of R.S. Sugirtharajah, undoubtedly the field's most influential contemporary scholar.

With postcolonialism's biblical studies topography in place, chapter 2 "An Incomplete Picture: The Book of Exodus in Postcolonial Discourse" reviews the work of leading theorists and biblical scholars who have worked specifically with this text. They include Edward W. Said, Robert Allen Warrior, Musa W. Dube, and Gale A. Yee. Beyond a summary, the chapter makes the case for a revision and reconceptualization of postcolonial critical categories for interacting with Exodus.

Following postcolonialism's theoretical groundwork on identity and hybridity theory (Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Said, and Homi K. Bhabha), my exegetical project then examines 1:1–3:15 by way of multidisciplinary exegesis.¹ Looking through the postcolonial prism, relevant questions include: What is the text's opinion of identity? How does the story convey identity ideologies? Do the characters in the text evince simplicity, complexity, or both? If, as I argue, the last option is the case, what are readers to make of dynamic insider-outsider statuses? Perhaps most importantly, what does it mean for YHWH to echo such dislocation?

Throughout the exegetical analysis, my working presupposition is that postcolonial biblical criticism offers the linguistic and conceptual resources necessary for a fuller, more nuanced, reading of Exodus. I do not wish to suggest, anachronistically, that the characters of Exodus and/or its authors are conversant with postcolonial theory. Rather, my assertion is that Exodus shows signs of intuiting insights that correspond *with* postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory, therefore, assists the interpretive project by helping the modern reader articulate the intuitions of the biblical text.

The topic of identity is engaged by examining three vignettes, Exod 1:1–2:10, 2:11–22, and 2:23–3:15. For each unit I have offered my own translation. References to textual material outside of Exod 1:1–3:15 are from the NRSV, unless otherwise stated. Chapter 3, “Identity under Construction: Contrasting Pharaonic Exclusivism with Hybridic Resistance” turns to the biblical text in earnest. At issue in the opening unit is the nature of authentic human identity. Discrepant visions emanate from the Egyptian monarch and the Hebrew underclass. In particular, the courageous examples of the midwives and the royal daughter serve to challenge and nuance the ethnocentricity of Egyptian-style identity ideology.

Chapter 4, “Identity Destruction: Moses’ Quadruple Displacement,” catalogs the protagonist’s multiple deteriorations. Moses is more than excluded from Egyptian and Hebrew extremes. His failed attempt to operate fluidly between polarities indicates also that the intermediary identity space is closed to him. In the climactic finale (2:22), Moses articulates the depth of his distress. The naming of Gershom, I argue, is the fourth and most severe, moment of rejection: Moses denounces himself.

1 Postcolonial biblical criticism advocates multidisciplinary use of various methodologies and approaches to reading. In the parlance of biblical interpretation, interpretation entails a broad attention to the world behind, of, and in front of, the text.

Chapter 5, “Identity Reconstruction: YHWH’s Avowal of Liminality” details Moses’ redemption by YHWH. In the indeterminate name Moses discovers a God of solidarity for whom disorientation is not to be lamented but celebrated. Thus the final chapter makes clear that the controlling topic, identity development, begins with the midwives, extends to Pharaoh’s daughter, moves to Moses, and ultimately finds expression in the self-revealing YHWH.

Chapter 6, “Retrospect and Prospect: Reviewing Findings and Mapping Contrapuntal Contact Zones in the Remainder of Exodus” undertakes two tasks. The first is a return to the findings of the exegetical discussion. Here I rearticulate the need for this study and highlight the seminal discoveries reached. The second task seeks to stimulate a postcolonial focus on Exodus by offering three possible trajectories for future work.

Conclusion

Postcolonial biblical scholars have tended to broad-brush the complexities of Exodus. Postcolonial biblical criticism has failed to realize its great multidisciplinary potential. Postcolonialists have not read Exodus in concert with the array of hermeneutical tools that have come to define the postcolonial studies field as the rich, vibrant, and sensitized arena that it is. Because of this deficiency there exists an indispensable opportunity to meaningfully reconsider this important narrative.

A comprehensive examination of Exodus through a postcolonial lens is an enormous project that will require more attention from a wide array of scholars working in league. Neither a conclusive nor exhaustive assessment is here in view. However, these chapters begin the process of reimagining Exodus in a constructive and sensitive fashion. The overarching hope is that a more faithful postcolonial reading of the book’s opening narratives will better capture the complicated din of its ideological voices and agendas.

The Contours of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

Introduction

Postcolonial biblical criticism shows little interest in standardizing or neatly enumerating its precepts in rigid ways, conceivably because, as a segment of minority discourse hermeneutics, it is subject to the postmodern suspicion of metanarratives. This reticence contributes to a rather dissentient mood among the field's practitioners. Perhaps part of that dissention is evinced in a reluctance to formalize. In fact, most of postcolonialism's thinking exists in a rather loose-leaf fashion as stand-alone single-author publications are uncommon. Postcolonial biblical criticism appears largely in the context of journal articles or published in compilations, anthologies, and edited volumes. Additionally, because postcolonialism endures in multiple forms throughout biblical and theological studies, definitions are highly contested among its diverse array of proponents.

An exhaustive discussion of postcolonial biblical criticism goes beyond the purpose of this chapter. Such a project would be wholly contradictory to the ethos of the postcolonial biblical approach. For the act of naming and defining in a comprehensive sense can itself be construed as an expression of imperial domination. However, significant statements are not entirely impossible. In what follows I detail the features of postcolonial biblical criticism as understood by its most prominent and enthusiastic advocates. Rather than systematizing existing data, the task at hand is to underscore those features and trends that are most clear, most repeated, and most foundational to postcolonialism's multiform expressions. Specific critiques of postcolonial biblical criticism are handled in chapter 2, using Exodus as the test case.

The Features of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

A Critique of Interpretive Authority: Reacting to Euroamerican Hegemony in Biblical Studies

R.S. Sugirtharajah has said of Edward Said's landmark work *Orientalism* that among its most powerful ideas was the revelation that "what passes for schol-

arship has actually to do with who has the power to articulate it.”¹ The field of biblical studies, postcolonial critics maintain, is not immune to this basic reality. Whether intentionally, through subconscious silence, or via a collusion of both, Euroamerican methodologies (principally, historical criticism and literary approaches) subtly and efficiently communicate three things. First, the Bible is a universally standard text with value for all cultures. Second, the Bible is at home in the West. Third, the Bible’s message may be unlocked through the critical implementation of procedures formulated in the West, provided of course that they are applied by an objective and unbiased interpreter. Fernando Segovia summarizes the result of these dangerous presuppositions in stating,

Thus, while the experience and culture of readers and critics were seemingly sacrificed in the pursuit of truth, in effect it was the experience and culture of some critics and readers that were sacrificed to the experience and culture of other critics and readers. The result was a classic case of neocolonialism, where the interests of the colonized or margins were sacrificed, subtly but surely, to the interests of the colonizers or the center.²

In its goal to craft universalized meaning and a one-size-fits-all hermeneutic, Euroamerican methodology threatened to entirely erase human identity from the exegetical equation in its attempt to uncover a singular biblical voice.

According to postcolonial biblical criticism, the Euroamerican model has gestated what it counts as academic study of the Bible. Euroamerican philosophical hegemony subtly continues geopolitical colonization of the past³ by communicating the traditional methods of biblical interpretation as the only valid ways for studying the Bible. Readers are only legitimate if they implement

1 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Margins and Mainstream,” in D.N. Premnath, *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (ed. D.N. Premnath; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007), 156.

2 Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 31.

3 Leo G. Perdue offers a summary of colonialism. He identifies profit as its unifying goal. The Euroamerican desire for land, natural resources, and cheap labor made colonies into wealth producers for national centers. In order to instill unity, stability and control over the colonized, imperial powers homogenized and indoctrinated populations by implementing common languages, introducing the dominant religion, and establishing schools to engrain in them a new sense of identity. *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 282–283. See further Perdue’s discussion of colonialism in terms of capitalist underpinnings and neocolonial advances made by transnational corporations. *Ibid.*, 285–288; 298–300.

its methods in an objective and unaligned fashion. This fetishizing of biblical studies has engendered an elitist ethos in which the voices of the untrained and underrepresented are muffled by those of the well-connected and powerful.⁴

Postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to reveal the colonial/imperial entanglements, which created and currently constrain the field of professional biblical studies. It aims to awaken readers to the ways in which these realities are prevalent on the universal level *and* internalized on subconscious personal levels.⁵ It also rejects the belief that objective knowledge or universal truth is altogether possible. Meaning, for postcolonial biblical criticism, is indeterminate and constructed, open, polyvalent, and beholden to its social location. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin summarize of the wider postcolonial field, “The insistence of post-colonial critics that writing is a social practice with an indelible social function suggests the possibility that meaning, too, is a social accomplishment characterized by the participation of the writer and reader.”⁶ Or, as Sugirtharajah says of religious texts, they present us with “meanings in motion.”⁷

Postcolonialists point to the nefarious double ascension of scientific exegesis, as an academic discipline, with that of world colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ It is not difficult to uncover how political domination crept stealthily into the conceptual discourses of biblical studies. For instance, Western style exegesis, postcolonialism is quick to recall, is nourished by Greco-Roman philosophical traditions which value the sharp dualism between the body and soul; thus, the reverence for mental faculties over and against the physicality of humanity endures. This dichotomous thinking is credited with motivating colonialism’s catastrophic equation by which the West identified

4 Ibid., 92.

5 For an impassioned and eloquent critique of white supremacy as a Eurocentric hermeneutical lens, see Osayande Obery Hendricks, “Guerilla Exegesis: ‘Struggle’ as a Scholarly Vocation,” in “Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism,” eds. Janice Anderson Capel and Jeffrey L. Staley, special issue, *Semeia* 72 (1995): 73–90.

6 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 2002), 183.

7 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Known Knowns and Unknown Unknowns: Scriptures and Scriptural Interpretations,” in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (ed. Vincent L. Wimbush; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 66.

8 In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Said identifies Shaffer’s book as an excellent resource for charting the background of Orientalism in biblical studies. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 18. See E.S. Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1975).

itself with the human soul and tagged the colonized as the “barbaric” material of the body.⁹ Likewise, the language of mainstream systematic theology (e.g. “Omni-”) suggests the conceptual and ethereal fervor still given to God-talk in the West.

The interpretive hegemony of Euroamerican methodology also appears in the ways some Western interpreters overlay the Bible with narrow Hebraic and Hellenistic templates, thus betraying the eclectic socio-cultural settings in which biblical texts were composed. For example, this bias often manifests in terms of de-Africanizing tendencies. The well-known designation of Bible territories as subsets of the larger “Middle East” is symptomatic of an impulse which seeks to repatriate Jesus as separate from African influence.¹⁰ Cain Hope Felder maintains that the term “Middle East” also reveals a cartographic bias. While the Bible is replete with mentions of countries in Africa (e.g. Egypt, Cush, Put, Punt, Ethiopia), rarely do Euroamerican publishers depict them in maps. One is more likely to encounter detailed maps of Eurasian provinces, which are cited in the text with far less frequency.¹¹ What this kind of omission shows is that the Euroamerican intelligentsia “effectively obscured or submerged the histories and aspirations of imperially subjected peoples.”¹²

Postcolonial biblical criticism is also troubled by the disregard for matters of race within mainstream biblical scholarship. For instance, biblical scholarship tends to deal with Israelite cultural identity as an issue of collective ethnicity focusing on the nation’s historical emergence. Little attention is paid to issues of race, which are demarcated by physical features.¹³ The African race

9 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001), 224.

10 Hendricks, “Guerilla Exegesis,” 83. David Tuesday Adamo makes a similar case in his discussion of the African qualities of the exodus group. See “A Mixed Multitude: An African Reading of Exodus 12:38,” in *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (Texts @ Contexts; ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 67–78.

11 C.H. Felder, “Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 297. See further Musa W. Dube “Savior of the World but not of This World: A Post-Colonial Reading of Spatial Construction in John” in *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 120–121.

12 Richard A. Horsley, “Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies,” in *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 154. Said outlines how Christianity subdivided the Orient into “Near” and “Far” versions. The former was marked as familiar, the latter was viewed as foreign and uncharted. Said, *Orientalism*, 58.

13 Frank M. Yamada and Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, “Culture and Identity,” in *The Peoples’ Bible* (ed. Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 7–8.

of biblical characters is regularly overlooked, despite the fact that the cultural melting pot from which Israel emerges is heavily influenced by the African continent. Felder thus suggests “Afro-Asiatic” be adopted as a more appropriate term than the generic “Eurasian” or “Semitic” options. The latter term, Felder believes, sidesteps ethnic designations by referring to a family of languages.¹⁴ This brand of prejudice all-too-regularly appears in our churches in the form of what Randall C. Bailey calls the “idolatry of whiteness.” He points out that ominous liturgical events like Lent, Advent and Good Friday are shrouded in purple and black, while furniture, clergy, choirs and the high holidays of Easter and Christmas are resplendent in white.¹⁵

Despite its critical stance, postcolonial biblical criticism does not altogether reject traditional methodologies, as one might expect. Neither does it denigrate traditional methodologies in favor of a position-less reader. Postcolonial biblical criticism opts to see these interpretive features as products of their own time and place. That is, these modes of inquiry maintain their merit insofar as they represent the values of their unique nineteenth and twentieth century European and American audiences. Historical criticism must be understood as the outcome of European enculturation. The method need only be attacked when it claims to be normative for all people living everywhere.

Thus, if the Euroamerican paradigm attempts to dehumanize the process of reading so as not to introduce personal bias, postcolonial biblical criticism aims to point out the reverse. It seeks to re-humanize all reading, even that of historical critics, by showing their connectedness to North Atlantic societal norms. Euroamerican strategies, postcolonialists contend, offer useful ways for understanding, not exclusive ways for understanding. In other words, postcolonial biblical criticism challenges the notion that a historical-critical reading of the Bible is the only avenue for determining truth. Postcolonialist scholars champion the diversity of cultural codes found within the biblical witness. Their aim is to recast the ways texts are read, knowledge is attained, and meaning is conceptualized.

Postcolonialist readings do not merely exist in order to balance the power equation so weighted toward the West. They do not seek simply to give bottom-most populations their due time amidst the cacophony of interpretive sounds.

14 Felder, “Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation,” 297–301. See further Charles B. Copher, “The Black Presence in the Old Testament,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 146–164.

15 Randall C. Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text,” in *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998),

Neither is the goal of postcolonial biblical criticism to make the margins into something to be “gloried in”; the goal is to discard the dynamic of margin and center altogether for the cause of holistic freedom.¹⁶ Postcolonial biblical criticism does not endeavor to negate Western-style Bible reading. It seeks to destabilize the unchallenged stranglehold of traditional interpretive strategies. Its hope is that the Euroamerican focus will not be regarded as *the* dominant mode, but simply take its place as one among many.

A Critique of Classical Pan-Liberationist Theology: Similarities and Divergences

Those familiar with the field of contextual/global hermeneutics are likely to discern cohesiveness between classical liberation theologies and the philosophical footing of postcolonial biblical criticism. Some basic similarities certainly exist. Both share a concern for humanizing the Other. Both are sensitive to the unique contexts in which flesh-and-blood readers reside. A regard for preserving the dignity of those considered “non-persons,” be they poor through economic or through social realities, is at the center of both interpretive programs. While postcolonial biblical criticism may not specifically privilege liberation’s famous “preferential option for the poor,” it does prefer readings that resist centrist agendas.

Both approaches share a mutual denunciation of epistemic evil imposed on societies by those who hold social, political, and economic power. Both see violence as a comprehensive and institutionalized reality. Oppressors and oppressive systems must be opposed by the conscientized. As such, human experience is not separate from Bible-reading but is considered an indispensable element of authentic Bible reading. Both liberation and postcolonial biblical criticism, to various degrees, hope for a world devoid of human suffering. Both approaches are attuned to the ideological tenor of interpretive schemes, along with the need to dismantle their power relationships for the sake of engendering a more just reality.¹⁷ The seminal associations between them are strong enough that Sugirtharajah believes the disciplines ought to ultimately remain co-workers in the struggle for the liberation of oppressed communities.¹⁸ However, for all of these correlations, their agendas diverge significantly in a variety of ways.

¹⁶ Sugirtharajah, “Margins and Mainstream,” 155.

¹⁷ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 259.

¹⁸ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 117.

Postcolonial biblical critics consider the aims of liberation theology to be outmoded and nearsighted for a medley of reasons. For one, postcolonialists offer the preliminary observation that the most popular renderings of liberation are the product of Western-trained scholars. Postcolonial scholars argue that leading figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, even James Cone were/are so engrossed in their European educational roots that they cannot wholly free themselves from such influences.¹⁹ Their bibliographies are strewn with the work of European and American thinkers. Rarely do they engage subaltern authors.

Second, where postcolonial biblical criticism suggests an amalgam of methodologies and approaches in partnership with sociological and anthropological disciplines, liberation remains staunchly devoted to the historical-critical procedures introduced by modernism, and thus, regards the message of liberation to be a recoverable element within the biblical text.²⁰ Marcella María Althaus-Reid contends, "It [liberation theology] may be the theology of the poor, but it still obeys the tradition of the thinking and logic of the centre and, although in opposition, it perpetuates the centre's discourse by default."²¹ This centrist agenda may be most felt in liberation theology's portrayal of an interventionist God who, though standing outside of history, infiltrates human situations to enact liberation. Sufferers are implicitly called to great patience as they await their divine rescue.²²

Third, liberation theology is confronted for its role in several types of homogenization. The first of these is a simplistic view of human identity. Aided by modernistic categories, liberationists tended to communicate in terms of well-

19 For the diagnosis of this phenomenon see Marcella María Althaus-Reid, "Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland: *Theme Park Theologies* and the Diaspora of the Discourse of the Popular Theologian in Liberation Theology," in *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000), 36–58.

20 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 240. See further, R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 77–78.

21 Althaus-Reid, "Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland," 42. Althaus-Reid is playfully incisive in her appraisal of the situation facing liberation itself. Not only does it reflect Western conventions, but it is also maligned by them. On the one hand, liberation has been exploited by the capitalist market to sell textbooks. On the other hand, the West has managed to trivialize liberation to the point of making it into a "theme park" theology so marginalized that it is of interest only in the way visitors muse over a trip to a vacation destination. Thus "real" theologies occupy the real world and not the fictionalized space of liberation. See especially, 41–42.

22 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 239.

known polarities: civilized/primitive, Christian/pagan, white/black, rich/poor, etc.²³ These crude binaries have resulted in reductive and bucolic depictions of Latin America and its people. The exclusivist topographic and peasant vocabularies of liberation (e.g. “grassroots”; “doing theology from below”; “with feet on the ground”) only reflected the need of *some* who were concerned with enacting agrarian reform.²⁴ Homogenizing identity resulted not only in the co-opting of liberation by the Christian mainstream,²⁵ but it also resulted in an overly-simplistic depiction of oppression which romanticized victims as completely detached from their taskmasters. Rita Nakashima Brock argues that the idea of a God who sides with the oppressed was unhelpful insofar as it created a myth of innocence.²⁶ Althaus-Reid identifies other misrepresentations, poignantly adding,

In Europe, as in the United States, Latin America has always been seen through the eyes of those who only see *pampas*, horses, *gauchos*, natives and jungles. The image of picturesque faithful Christian natives dressed in colourful attire and cultivating the soil while suffering much exploitation was attractive for European discourse.²⁷

23 Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., introduction to *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 11.

24 Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland,” 48. Althaus-Reid also mentions another stereotype perpetrated by liberation theology as that of the popular/community theologian. This individual is caricatured as one who shows solidarity in poverty and reads barefoot with the community. He/she is set in contrast to the prim and disconnected North Atlantic scholar “made of books and university research.” Ibid., 38. More generally, Alice W. Hunt is concerned that the language of SBL sessions and program units carrying an “other-labeling” (e.g. feminist, African American, womanist, liberation, LGBT/queer) creates a differentiation, which communicates their peripheral nature. “Response: In the Beginning—Again” in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. John L. Berquist; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 205–206.

25 Sugirtharajah, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” 4.

26 Rita Nakashima Brock, “Ending Innocence and Nurturing Willfulness,” in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (ed. Carol Adams and Marie Fortune; New York: Continuum, 1995), 80–81.

27 Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland,” 49. Wong Wai Ching adds that Third World theologies, in general, have yet to adopt the lessons of postcolonialism’s self-criticism. Dependence on restrictive Western definitions for identity has even resulted in Third World scholars “freezing themselves within a category of difference.” Wong Wai Ching, “Postcolonialism,” *DTWT*, 170.

Going further, liberation theology volumes in the English-speaking world regularly feature the familiar and jarring images of either extreme destitution or childlike faith. This commercialization of human suffering certainly arouses compassion, but at the steep price of stereotyping Latin America as a place of wanton poverty, need, even backwardness. Where are the images of cosmopolitan urban centers in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, or Montevideo? Such depictions do not evoke the severe economic poverty that is a common caricature of Latin America.

Postcolonialists reimagine the locale of oppression. It is shifted from the expected pastoral setting to an urban one which calls for a new vocabulary that takes into account “margins,”²⁸ “slums” and makes theological thinking something done on the “street level.”²⁹ Since poverty takes on multiple forms, postcolonial biblical scholars believe that interpretation must answer with fresh expressions that are equally diverse. What Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says said of feminist theology, namely, that it represents not an “option for the poor” but an “option for ourselves,” captures the intensely personal din of the postcolonial project.³⁰

Postcolonial biblical criticism also fights this archive of stereotypes by highlighting the extremely complicated nature of suffering. Postcolonialism’s assessment of systemic violence considers itself to be more all-encompassing than that of liberation. The oppressed are victimized by many forms of intermingled assaults. Postcolonial biblical criticism even expands on the “inter-structured and multiplicative dominations” that Fiorenza identifies as *kyriocentrism*.³¹ The postcolonialist critic is attentive to the totality of human experience, deeming issues of race, class, sex, caste, age, and economic status as conspiring together to produce unique forms of marginalization.³² For the post-

28 According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin indicate that the use of the word does not necessarily necessitate a fixed center. Rather, “The marginal indicates a *positionality* that is best defined in terms of the limitations of a subject’s access to power.” *Post-Colonial Studies*, 121.

29 Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland,” 48.

30 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Ahead,” in Fernando F. Segovia, *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 17.

31 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 14. Fiorenza maintains, “As an analytic category, kyriarchy articulates a more comprehensive systemic analysis of empire, in order to underscore the complex inter-structuring of dominations, and to locate sexism and misogyny in the political matrix—or better, ‘patrix’—of a broader range of dominations.” *Ibid.*

32 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 262.

colonialist thinker the enfranchised/disenfranchised, upper class/under class binaries employed by liberation have themselves proven unhelpful. Their use threatens to simplify and make defuse the encyclopedic nature of human suffering.

Fourth, postcolonial biblical criticism maintains that liberation suffers from a fidelity to textualism. Thus, liberation hermeneutically privileges the biblical text as the ultimate source for issues of morality and theology.³³ While liberation relies heavily on optimism that the biblical text can be re-articulated for the purposes of freedom, postcolonial biblical criticism leans admittedly toward secular humanism. In the seesaw between text and reader, liberation identifies the message of a liberating God to be a retrievable element found in the text. Postcolonial biblical criticism maintains that human liberation is “born of public consensus created in a democratic dialogue between text and context.”³⁴

Liberation is reluctant to question whether God can be anything other than liberator. But the problem, as postcolonialists see it, arises from liberation’s tendency to construct such morality from a selective reading of the Bible; one that conveniently overlooks the most troubling texts. Postcolonialist scholars notice that even within the larger narrative framework of its seminal event, the exodus, liberation theology is rather insular. Not only does Israel’s divine election go unquestioned, but so does the climactic entrance into the Promised Land. This entrance, postcolonial scholars assert, is made possible only after the wholesale annihilation of nations in the conquest narratives. In the story, Israel moves from the position of the marginalized lower classes to that of the powerful elite. Deuteronomy and Joshua speak of a people who are morally, religiously, and militarily superior to their neighbors. While it is certain that the ethnocentric call for genocide stands in tension with the Torah’s overwhelming call for inclusion of the Other, liberationists have been reluctant to offer comment on these passages or these tensions. Theirs is a with-the-grain exegesis of emancipation.

Postcolonial biblical criticism reminds us that the Bible emerges from a world filled with relationships of national, political, and military subjugation. However, postcolonial biblical criticism wishes to re-examine stories like the exodus by focusing in on its shadow side and bringing to light the ways in which colonial forces have employed analogical interpretive strategies to legitimize the domination of people the world over.³⁵ The sentiments of Andian Indians

33 Ibid., 259.

34 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 120.

35 John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 63.

writing to Pope John Paul II in 1985 may best capture postcolonialism's sense of disillusionment with regard to the Bible:

We, the Indians of the Andes and America have decided to give you back your Bible, since for the past five hundred centuries it has brought us neither love, peace or justice. We beg you take your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, whose hearts and minds are in greater need of its moral teachings. As part of the colonial exchange we received the Bible, which is an ideological weapon of attack. The Spanish sword used in the daytime to attack and kill the Indians, turned at night into a cross which attacked the Indian soul.³⁶

Postcolonialist inquiry is suspicious of liberation's persistent fidelity to the Christian metanarrative. Postcolonial biblical criticism opposes the idea that true liberation entails a liberation *into* a Christian framework. It is troubled by the Church's historical complicity with the side of the colonizer and in some forms is leery of evangelical gospel claims. The postcolonialist scholar discards the binary of Christians/non-Christians and takes a celebratory stance toward religious pluralism.³⁷ The automatic canonical status afforded to the Bible is challenged,³⁸ as is the conviction that liberation entails freedom from sin or freedom in an eschatological sense. In its place postcolonial biblical criticism strives to dismantle the certitude to which traditional biblical interpretation is accustomed. In so doing it risks irreverence.

What remains for postcolonial biblical criticism is a paradox. The Bible is both enemy and answer. It is a text that communicates the safe embrace of promise and social transformation set alongside the dangerous potential of conquest and subjugation. As one scholar puts it, "postcolonial discourse involves both critique and construction."³⁹ In one direction, liberation establishes the principle of analogy. The God of Israel is interested in authoring freedom for those of the Late Bronze age and for those of us in the twenty-first

36 "Pope Asked to Take Back the Bible," *The Telegraph*, 7 February 1985.

37 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 262. Perdue adds, "In postcolonialism, Christianity relinquishes its position at the center, its territories, and its cultural homogeneity." Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*, 319.

38 See the article by Jon L. Berquist, "Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 78–95.

39 M.W. Dube Shomanah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretations," in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 361.

century. The God of the Bible establishes a paradigm that is meant to change the conditions of human suffering for the better. However, a careful reading reveals that the biblical text is *not* exclusively on the side of the oppressed.⁴⁰ Although it is certainly important to speak of a liberating God as a controlling theme (often overlooked in Euroamerican scholarship), it is also important to notice the ideological and colonial aspects of texts. After all, the Bible has been used to promulgate deadly expansionist regimes. As Kwok Pui-lan states, the Bible has been “the running dog of imperialism.”⁴¹ Rather than vowing allegiance to a Judeo-Christian framework, the postcolonial critic explodes the supremacy of the Bible and places indigenous texts alongside it in an effort to achieve mutual illumination (more on this below). Therefore, the Bible is viewed as one text among many for the construction of meaning.

To borrow Sugirtharajah’s incisive phrase, postcolonial thinking itself represents an “irruption within the irruption,”⁴² that is, an internal reaction which is both indebted to, and moving away from, a classical understanding of liberation theology.⁴³ While liberationists attempted to rescue the poor by recasting

40 Collins offers the following summary, “Attractive though it may be to proclaim the Bible as the Word of God when it advocates justice and freedom and to point to modern analogies, we must remember that it is the same Bible that commands the slaughter of the Canaanites and Amalekites and that it lends itself all too readily to analogical application in those cases too. Liberation in all its forms remains a noble ideal, and there is much in the Bible to support it, but it does not derive its validation merely from the fact that it is affirmed in the Bible.” Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, 74.

41 Kwok Pui Lan, “Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Rev. ed. Ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 18–28.

42 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 222–226.

43 It bears reiterating that the historical-critical bent of liberation theology is only a feature of its original form begun in the 1960s. Sugirtharajah makes some passing comments surrounding an internal shift within liberation in recent history. The discipline has moved from 1) the macro-level discourse of classical liberation theology done by professional theologians, to 2) grass-roots reading communities of non-trained Christian believers in Latin America (e.g. Solentiname community in Nicaragua). In the 1980s, these readers eschewed issues of historicity and sought interpretations that helped them better understand their lives first and foremost. Today, 3) identity-specific modes have exposed classical liberation interpretation as being a totalizing enterprise with little concern for the experiences of specific groups (e.g. women, dalits, American Indians, Aborigines). These groups now push for a voice in the highly specialized and patriarchal center of liberation hermeneutics. While emphasis is placed on specialized groups, the textual focus and aims of classical liberation remain. See Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* 203–243. See further, Juan Luis Segundo, *Sign of the Times: Theological Reflections*, tr. Robert

interpretations of the Bible, postcolonialists are now casting doubt on the efficacy of such a practice altogether. Liberating the destitute by the very means that created their enslavement, the Bible seems irrational to postcolonialists. Moreover, can the Christian church and its text, so responsible for atrocities in the name of God, be reinvigorated in a way that can enact liberation? Or have liberation hermeneutics offered a false hope about what can be achieved through the Bible? For postcolonial biblical criticism, answers to such questions are not easily achieved.

Liberation theology, as classically communicated, proved an important and vital articulation without which Third World⁴⁴ theologies (postcolonial biblical criticism included) may not have developed as they are now known. The fact that postcolonial biblical criticism, perhaps, owes its existence to it, is difficult to sidestep. However, hindsight has revealed liberation to be excessively limited in its assessment of human issues. For postcolonial biblical criticism, liberation's homogenization of the poor, its enduring fidelity to the historical-critical model, its excessive biblicism, its implicit disdain for indigenous religious practices, its flat construal of human identity, its conservative stance, and its belief

R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1993), 71. Moore and Segovia agree, maintaining that what is understood to be postcolonial biblical criticism comes out of more recent manifestations of liberation hermeneutics. These are interested in the sociocultural location of the interpreter and leave behind the Marxist focus. See Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Beginnings, Trajectories, Intersections," in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia; New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 1–22.

- 44 References to the controversial term "Third World" follow R.S. Sugirtharajah's explanation. He understands "Third World" as a rehabilitated designation used to "encapsulate the political, economic and cultural imbalances that exist between the powerful and the powerless." *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 1. Similarly, Virginia Fabella designates it as "a supra-geographic denotation, describing a social condition marked by social, political, religious, and cultural oppressions that render people powerless and expendable." "Third World," *DTWT* 202; See further xxii, 204. Elleke Boehmer offers the term as designating an "embattled new sovereignty in a context of continuing imperialistic domination." *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford, 2005), 9. In an opposite direction, Dube points out that the phrase betrays the global reality in which these nations occupy Two-Thirds the global space and population. For her the term minimizes "the presence and importance of the Other." See "Curriculum Transformation: Dreaming of Decolonization in Theological Studies," in *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (ed. D.N. Premnath; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007), 123.

that hermeneutics could be rescued for the cause of Christian liberation, proves to be overly triumphalistic.

Classical liberation lacks the self-reflective, self-critical posture that a postcolonial sensibility is keen to embrace. For postcolonial biblical criticism the Bible's "message of liberation is seen as far more indeterminate and complicated."⁴⁵ In its day liberation theology was certainly a revolutionary step worthy of appreciation. However, the postmodern era has shown that liberation was/is incapable and unequipped to answer the kinds of questions uttered in today's motley hermeneutical landscape. By way of its interpretive hyper-indigenization, postcolonial biblical criticism represents the next step beyond liberation. A key aim is therefore to remain vibrant and viable as an approach.

A Critique of Temporal Fixity: The Issue of Hyphenization

According to Dube, "a postcolonial framework offers a better language for assessing/highlighting global oppression and the international search for justice."⁴⁶ An aid to the creation of this "better language" is the field's more recent commitment to de-hyphenating itself. Though indeed, a key source of terminological ambiguity within the discipline continues to stem from the existence or absence of the controversial hyphen (e.g. post-colonialism). While the issue is hotly debated, most are dissatisfied with the implications represented by it.⁴⁷ This distaste for the hyphen is highly ironic in light of postcolonialism's commitment to understanding identity as itself hyphenated (more on identity below).

Nevertheless, chief among objections is the insinuation that colonialism represents a bygone era.⁴⁸ The hyphenated form implies that world societies have transcended colonial ideologies and progressed past them.⁴⁹ Anne Mc-

45 Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 78.

46 Musa W. Dube, "Postcolonialism and Liberation," in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (ed. Miguel A. De La Torre; St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 294.

47 A seminal discussion is offered by Ella Shohat. She cites the ambiguous and problematic dimensions of the hyphenated and unhyphenated forms, arguing that the term, unlike "Third World" and "neo-colonialism," which entertain the possibility of political and cultural resistances, ironically de-politicizes historical connectedness and so diffuses nuance. "Notes on the Post-Colonial," *SocT* 31/32 (1992): 99–113.

48 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 268. The notion that formal colonialism is a thing of the past is only partially true in today's world. Colonial arrangements are still in place among many territories (e.g. British Gibraltar, the Falklands/Malvinas, U.S. Puerto Rico, Virgin Island, Canary Islands).

49 Laura E. Donaldson, "Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading: An Introduction," in "Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading," ed. Laura E. Donaldson, special issue, *Semeia* 75 (1996): 5.

Clintock argues that the hyphen reasserts the myth of progress while also recasting binary oppositions that postcolonialists are keen to resist. For McClintock, the hyphenated form is limiting in that it more clearly identifies the discipline under the temporal axis of time (e.g. post), while obscuring issues of power.⁵⁰

Moreover, opponents contend that wherever the hyphen remains, the mind is dulled to the reality of persistent political, cultural, and economic Western ideological *neo-imperialism*. Thus, the hyphen, which appears mostly in the field's literature of the early 1970s created "a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept."⁵¹ For Ella Shohat the hyphen contributes to the temporal problematic by collapsing the diverse chronologies of nationalist struggles throughout the Third World. That is, the term is too all-encompassing for describing locales that enter the realm of their temporal "post" at different times.⁵² The hyphenated term is further complicated by the fact that not all parts of the world can be said to have yet experienced their "post" colonial moment. The hyphenated form has a de-politicizing effect, leaving no room for the experience of contemporary resistance.⁵³

The unhyphenated merging of "post" with "colonialism" hints at a move "beyond" colonialism in favor of an ethical direction.⁵⁴ More pointedly, and despite the time-based connotations, "Its 'post' indicates not a chronological but a critical idea."⁵⁵ Segovia regards it as "a reference to that frame of mind, individual or collective, that problematizes the imperial/colonial phenomenon as a whole and, in so doing, attains a sense of conscientization."⁵⁶

50 Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *SocT* 31/32 (1992): 85–98. Against McClintock, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, who (in chapter 6 of their second edition) argue that maintaining the hyphen emphasizes "the discursive and material effects of the historical 'fact' of colonialism." *The Empire Writes Back*, 198.

51 Neil Lazarus, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (ed. Neil Lazarus; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2004), 2.

52 Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," 101–104. See further, McClintock, who criticizes the term for failing to encompass the panorama of geo-political differences. "The Angel of Progress," 87–93.

53 *Ibid.*, 104.

54 Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, "Introduction," 6.

55 *Ibid.*, 7.

56 Fernando F. Segovia, "Interpreting Beyond Borders: Postcolonial Studies and Diasporic Studies in Biblical Criticism," in *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000), 12.

Postcolonial biblical criticism exists “as a perpetual set of critical possibilities,”⁵⁷ deployed to address the array of neo-colonial power relations in issues of cultural, racial, and ethnic spheres.⁵⁸ The intimation is similar to that of “postmodernity” as a consciousness. To employ “postmodern” is to make more than a temporal designation; it is to describe a critical project that defines a body of cultural discourse which aims to subvert social inequalities wrought by colonial and/or imperial power. The absence of the hyphen, as with postmodernity, allows the postcolonial field to retain its transhistorical properties.

Interrogation and Reclamation: The Bible in Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

The postcolonial biblical approach aims to “focus on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining both the biblical narratives *and* biblical interpretation.” (emphasis mine).⁵⁹ Primarily, postcolonial examinations seek to interrogate interpretations authored by biblical scholars (from the perspective of subaltern readers) *and* those of the biblical authors themselves. In doing so, naming the multiple abuses of interpretation is paramount. A few examples are in order to make the point.

One such interpretive oversight is that which uses the books of Matthew and Acts as programs for missionary activity. This brand of narrow analysis was itself a driving scriptural proof text leading to the violent “evangelization” of Amerindian people groups throughout Central and South America. To combat the claim that missionary obligation is warranted by Matthew, Sugirtharajah cites the general anti-Gentile tenor of the book. He goes on to notice that in Acts, Paul planned nothing beyond his initial trip (Acts 13–14). In his second and third “journeys” Paul drifts from place to place reacting to situations in his life. These realities lead Sugirtharajah to conclude that “the missionary pattern was imposed on Acts in the colonial period because commentators were swayed by the momentous territorial changes taking place and were reading these

57 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 9. See further Dube who, following Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, opts to understand the term as encompassing “the panorama of modern imperialism, beginning with the process of colonization, the struggle for political independence, and the emergence of the neocolonial globalization era.” *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 4, 15.

58 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 201.

59 Sugirtharajah, “Charting the Aftermath,” 17.

events back into Apostolic times.”⁶⁰ The crudest forms of bourgeois exegesis formulated imperialistic theology that was used by colonizing countries such as Britain and the United States to legitimize their rule.

Such theology also assumed the Pentateuchal promises to Israel and through them justified the ruthless colonization and annihilation of Africans and Native Amerindians. The crucial move was to equate these people with the Canaanites of the Iron Age.⁶¹ Missionaries to the colonial world read the First Testament through the lenses of Darwinian social evolution to create a pattern for the development of faith. Fully-mature believers would have passed through primitive stages (e.g. animism, polytheism, humanism, and legalism) on their ascendant journey toward the fuller revelation of Christ in the New Testament.⁶² The First Testament was little more than a missionary handbook. It contained test cases meant to aid the development of the so-called uncivilized masses.

Equally disturbing was the legitimizing tactic of European missionaries for whom Ham was the cursed father of dark-skinned people (Gen 9:18–27). Denominational and ecumenical presses continue to orientalize the East by reductively essentializing the Third World as the locus of exotic or demonic forces.⁶³ Postcolonial biblical criticism exists because marginalized readers in the colonized world have become aware of the fact that the message/s of the Bible was/are distorted and wielded against indigenous groups as a tool for colonization/neocolonization. For these reasons, and others too many to list, Desmond Tutu once famously recalled the following popular African story:

60 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 21. Sugirtharajah points out that ancient writers like Irenaeus, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Bede, Erasmus or Calvin all failed to see the missionary pattern that later readers found in the book of Acts. To impose the missionary pattern on Acts, Sugirtharajah believes, reinforces the misguided idea that the Western churches were later viewed in terms of benevolent givers of the gospel to the heathen East. See pages 13–36.

61 Donaldson chronicles the First Puritan Conquest of the Northeast's Pequot American Indian nation. Following conflicts with colonizers, their population dwindled in numbers from 13000 to 1000. On May 26, 1637 the apologist John Higginson offered Judg 20 as the “vindication” for colonist's assaults on the Pequot and parallels the biblical deliverance of the Benjamites with that of the Puritans. Donaldson believes that a postcolonial exploration should read chapter 20 with 19. She lobbies for an interpretation that links its sensitivity to violence against women with violence against people groups. See “Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading,” 8–10.

62 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge), 151–152.

63 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 274.

"When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."⁶⁴

As I have already stated, the work of postcolonial biblical criticism does not settle for simply probing the activities of modern exegetes. Ample scrutiny is placed on the earliest hermeneutists; the biblical authors themselves. Among the most rehearsed tropes is the sharp critique of violence in the biblical text. The conventional example is to cite the incongruity of a loving God set against the calls for Canaanite and Amalekite exterminations. One of the most creative and widely referenced ventures has been to reread the conquest narrative of Joshua 1–6 from the perspective of contemporary conquered populations. For example, Robert Allen Warrior's Native American reading of Exodus (discussed below in chapter 2) challenges the triumphant nature of the tale. He wonders how a story of liberation can include the subsequent dispossession and genocide of subjected Canaanites.⁶⁵

Analogously, Kari Latvus notices how the closing verses of the Deuteronomistic history (2 Kgs 25:22–30) present YHWH in alliance with the Babylonian ruling regime. So that "the more Yahweh is seen as the ruler of the historical events—as in DH—the more Yahweh is also responsible for the imperialistic policy of Babylon ... Reality created by political powers was thus transposed in theology."⁶⁶

Sugirtharajah in turn considers the story of the church's expansion via Paul's journeys to be extremely shortsighted because there is no recounting of eastern missionary activity to places like Edessa, Persia, India, and China. Acts is principally concerned with the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.⁶⁷

64 See Steven D. Gish, *Desmond Tutu: A Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004), 101. Variants of this story have been attributed to others.

65 Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *ChrC* 49 (1989): 261–265.

66 Kari Latvus, "Decolonizing Yahweh: A Postcolonial Reading of 2 Kgs 24–25," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 190.

67 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 25. Elsewhere Sugirtharajah comments on the work of G.B. Caird, who has deepened our understanding the New Testament's multiculturalism by showing that expansive trade contributed to the early church's interconnectedness with Eastern religions. Caird notes that evidence of Buddhist missionaries in Western Asia dates to 256 BCE. Theravada Buddhist monks were also present in Alexandria. Influence from Indian, Buddhist and Hindu traditions reveal the rich literary and cultural background of first century Judea. Paul's reference to self-immolation in Corinthians may very well have been inspired by a monument dedicated to an Athenian monk commemorating a similar death. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 28.

A final critique has been leveled at the book of Esther for being strangely silent with regard to issues of gender exploitation or class while endorsing a patriarchal male character (Mordecai) and championing an assimilationist strategy.⁶⁸

Alternatively postcolonial biblical criticism also believes that some texts present—faintly and overtly—suppressed counter-narratives and silences that resisted empire. Though less developed, this second iteration of postcolonialist examination aims to reopen, reclaim, recover, reappropriate, and free the biblical text itself. Effort is made to give smothered characters and themes voice. Like feminist criticism, postcolonial biblical criticism is acutely sensitive to what goes unsaid. It aims to quantify and calculate these silences in an effort to decolonize its characters and reading communities alike. Gerald O. West terms this procedure as a reading “other-wise.”⁶⁹

Laura Donaldson resists dominant reading strategies to create new possibilities for women inside and outside of the text. For example, she reads through the misogynist story of 1 Samuel 28 and sees the expertise, availability, and notoriety of the Medium of Endor as a model of resistance and evidence of the survival of indigenous practices living on in spite of oppressive imperial decrees.⁷⁰ She reads Rahab from the perspective of colonized Native Americans to identify how the text employs her sexuality to doubly colonize and exploit her.⁷¹ In the same article Donaldson goes on to nuance the traditional views of Ruth. She re-imagines the pivotal opening scene through indigenous exegetical lenses by highlighting the way Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law, courageously embraces her own people, ancestors, and cultural heritage in opting to return to her mother's house.⁷² Through her act, Cherokee women can simi-

68 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 252.

69 Gerald O. West, ed., *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

70 Laura E. Donaldson, “Gospel Hauntings: The Postcolonial Demons of New Testament Criticism,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia; New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 97–113. See especially 106–109.

71 Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes,” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 20–36. See further, Musa Dube who critiques Fewell and Gunn's positivistic feminist reading of Rahab. *Postcolonial Feminist*, 76–80, 121–155. See further Randall C. Bailey, “He Didn't Even Tell Us the Worst of It!” *USQR* 59 (2005): 15–24.

72 For a vernacular exploration of Ruth that remains focused on the central character see Dalila Nayap-Pot, “Life in the Midst of Death: Naomi, Ruth and the Plight of Indigenous Women,” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Aca-

larly be spurred to maintain indigenous identity against the domination of outside forces.

Comparably, Itumeleng Mosala, writing in the context of South African apartheid, calls attention to the example of Queen Vashti's liberating rebellion and is critical of the text's patriarchal elevation of Mordecai over the subservient Esther.⁷³ Philip Chia does not read "against" the text but highlights how postcolonial themes can serve to illuminate the aims and agenda of the biblical narrator. Chia reads *for* Daniel's risky resistance to imperial power in chapter 1.⁷⁴

In each of these scenarios, the aim is not to produce a timeless interpretive outcome but perhaps to enumerate the whole litany of colonial elements and postcolonial angles of thought. The conundrums of the text are not solved they are explored. As Yee notes, the task is to investigate "the myriad textual (re)interpretations of the biblical text that may support or resist the workings of empire."⁷⁵

Postcolonialists understand that the Bible cannot always be upheld as a beacon of hope; it is sometimes brought low as an accomplice to human suffering. What remains is paradoxical. Interrogation and reclamation find a way to coexist within the field. The Bible is "both a problem and a solution."⁷⁶

demic, 1999), 52–65. Nayap-Pot spots in Ruth a person who, much like indigenous women all over the world, strives valiantly for survival in the midst of a hostile and patriarchal world. Still further, postcolonial feminist analysis of Ruth can be found in Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001) and Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 100–121.

73 Itumeleng Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 134–141. Likewise, Fiorenza advocates a figurative reading of Revelation's "Whore Babylon," not as an archetype of actual women, but as a critique of empire. *The Power of the Word*, 133–137. For a comparison of indigenous and historical-critical renderings of the Vashti character, see Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours is a Necessity! Rereading Vashti as African-South African Women" in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 179–194.

74 Philip Chia, "On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 1," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 171–185.

75 Gale A. Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," in *Methods for Exodus* (ed. Thomas B. Dozeman; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010), 207.

76 Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 78.

Contrapuntal Reading

We have seen that in its most creative forms, postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to pioneer a unique brand of reading. Indeed, the “contrapuntal” strategy is perhaps the closest that postcolonial criticism comes to endorsing a unique methodology. This term emerges from Said’s background in music.⁷⁷ It refers to the musical technique of counterpoint, in which contrasting musical tropes exist in the same work as concurrently distinct and complimentary. Said maintains that textual meaning, like a piece of contrapuntal music, can be reached in an energetic, multi-directional, and responsive fashion that accesses a diversity of texts read synoptically. This is not to suggest that contrasting textual elements are harmonized or smoothed over. Contrapuntal reading enables the implications of colonial exploitations to become evident. In this vein, Robert Young has described the field of postcolonial theory as a “montage” which seeks “to juxtapose perspectives and times against one another, seeking to generate a creative set of relations between them.”⁷⁸ Meaning is found in the friction points at which texts inform one another. A goal of reading contrapuntally is, therefore, to expose the grip of imperialism in the production of knowledge via texts.

Contrapuntal reading takes as its starting point the idea that there exists a multiplicity of texts in the lives of populations. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia credit Said’s complex and tension-filled sense of identity for the development of contrapuntality “because it involves a continual dialogue between the different and sometimes apparently contradictory dimensions of his own worldliness.”⁷⁹ If part of postcolonial biblical criticism’s aim is to recuperate the voice

77 See Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 93–94. Said’s love of classical music comes through in a few of his books: *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon, 2006). See further Daniel Barenboim, “Maestro,” in *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation* (ed. Homi Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 163–167.

78 Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), 7.

79 Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, *Edward Said*, 93. Said was a cultural hybrid. He was born in West Jerusalem, then part of British Mandate Palestine, to Palestinian Christian parents in 1935. He received his education in both Western colonial schools (Palestine, Egypt) and later in American institutions (Mount Hermon, Princeton, Harvard). From an early age, Said learned to navigate the many intersections afforded him by a multicultural and multinational upbringing. A unique blend of varied experiences gave Said a fascinating perspective that served him well in a distinguished career as a literary theorist, cultural critic,

of the Other, then the world of the Other must also be known. However, indigenous texts are not automatic winners over and against the Bible by sheer virtue of their indigeness. Instead of privileging indigenous texts over those of the Bible (a move with the potential to establish a brand of re-colonization), reading contrapuntally means that both the text of the colonizer and that of the colonized are read *simultaneously*. The Bible should not, and certainly cannot, be read in isolation.⁸⁰ Said explains:

In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked ... In addition, one must connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts, experiences from which it draws support.⁸¹

To encounter a text contrapuntally, therefore, means that the reader takes an adversarial stance that accounts for both the existence of imperialism and the resistance *to* imperialism within it. Contrapuntality means reading with an abiding awareness that canonical texts do not exist in a vacuum. Texts must be examined in light of their oppositional and discrepant counter-narratives.

This reading strategy requires that narratives be indigenized, in one direction, by way of cross-cultural analogies. The reader begins with an understanding of his/her cultural heritage and reads the Bible in search of correspondences, be they textual or conceptual connections that serve to syncretize the ancient context with the modern one. The reader searches for overlaps in local traditions and those of the ancient text. The narrative of Scripture is most often enriched by the *popular* texts of a people (e.g. folktales, riddles, legends, plays,

social activist, and comparative literature scholar. On the many conflicting dimensions at work in Said's background, see Said, "Interview with Edward Said," in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (ed. Michael Sprinker; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 264; cf. Tariq Ali, *Conversations with Edward Said* (Oxford: Seagull, 2006), 116–117, 120; Said, *Culture*, 12; Mustapha Marrouchi, introduction to *Edward Said at the Limits*, by Mustapha Marrouchi (Albany, Ny.: State University of New York, 2004), 15; Gareth Griffiths, introduction to *Paradoxical Citizenship: Edward Said* (ed. Silvia Nagy-Zekmi; Lanham, Md.: Lexington), 2006.

80 To avoid this detachment, Sugirtharajah is adamant that biblical studies and its scholars should create classes that display the interconnectedness of various religious texts with those of the Bible. See *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in the Modern World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 17, 100–101.

81 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 67.

proverbs, poems).⁸² As Justin Upkong says of African biblical interpretation, this entails a reading “with” ordinary community members, not the learned guiding of expert teachers.⁸³

These cultural analogies are most illuminating when they uncover “performantial parallels.” For example, an analogical reading of the so-called cannibalistic story of John 6:53–55 is given greater significance when read from the context of Malawian witchcraft. A. Musopole interpreted the passage to mean that “anyone who feeds on Jesus takes into themselves the very life-force of Jesus to re-enforce their own lives.”⁸⁴ Another example of culturally sensitive reading rests in the archetypal trickster figure of African settings. Rather than understanding Abraham’s deceitful pattern (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18) as an example of dubious motives and moral failures, African readers view the practice of trickery as a last resort for those in hopeless situations facing those in power.⁸⁵

To read contrapuntally means that one affirms the Bible’s status as a collection of cultural documents that can be at home outside the West. Rather than using exclusively Western philosophy or theology to bridge the gap between text and interpreter, postcolonialists strive to access local practices as key reservoirs of data. The Bible is reread, which does not mean that it merely read again or reinterpreted: it is reperceived.⁸⁶

Contrapuntal reading aims, therefore, at deepening the meaning of the Bible by standing against the total closing off of its meaning. Since all meaning is culturally conditioned, there cannot be a single rigid meaning for all time and all people. Postcolonial biblical criticism contends that the search for meaning has moved beyond a monolithic fidelity to one people’s story, just as it has moved beyond the canonical boundaries imposed by the church’s authoritative hierarchy. Or as Elsa Tamez declares of the postcolonial project, “In the

82 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 313–316.

83 Justin Upkong, “Intercultural Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 21. See further, Daniel Patte, introduction to *Global Bible Commentary* (ed. Daniel Patte; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), xxix–xxxii.

84 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretations,” 314–315. For more on drawing parallels, see Sugirtharajah’s comments on the comparative hermeneutics of Arumuka Navalar, a nineteenth century Vellala Saiva Hindu. *The Bible and Empire*, 165–175.

85 Sugirtharajah, “Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretations,” 315.

86 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Bible,” *DTWT*, 13.

application of the new theory of the reconstruction of texts, it is necessary to break with canonical boundaries, explore other texts, and construct new gospels with inclusive categories.”⁸⁷ The world of the extracanonical is not to be feared or guarded against. It is to be embraced and valued. The supremacy of the Bible is broken and simultaneously enriched by reading it alongside a people’s indigenous texts. Contrapuntal reading has been described as “cross-textual” reading.⁸⁸

As evidenced by contrapuntal exegesis, hermeneutics have become pluriform and cacophonous. The approach calls for scholars who are willing to blend the cosmopolitan and vernacular into a “vernacular cosmopolitanism.”⁸⁹ Postcolonial biblical criticism calls critics to be familiar with the local practice, texts, and ideologies of differing communities. Gone are the days of a one-size-fits all interpretation in which exegeted meaning was the logical result of learning to use a limited set of North Atlantic methods and textbooks. In a move reminiscent of postcolonial critics, Osayande Obery Hendricks describes his Afrocentric/Ghettocentric brand of reading as “guerilla exegesis” and calls for the exegete to use an eclectic arsenal ranging from Marx, Malcolm x, Habermas, Bultmann, Barth, Fanon, Foucault, Mosala, Gottwald, Garvey, Gramsci, even Marvin Gaye.⁹⁰

Lastly, contrapuntal practice draws attention to the current disdain for traditional binaries. Exclusively East versus West, vernacular versus metropolitan, us versus them juxtapositions are no longer viable descriptions of socio-political or textual realities. Crisp demarcation lines are exchanged for fuzzy ones or none at all. At the root of this movement away from facile descriptions is yet another important feature of postcolonial biblical criticism, a reappraisal of human identity.

87 Elsa Tamez, “El Salto Hermenéutico de Hoy,” in “Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading,” ed. Laura E. Donaldson, special issue, *Semeia* 75 (1996): 201.

88 A synopsis of cross-textual readings can be found in Bradley L. Crowell, “Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible,” *CBR* 7.2 (2009): 230–232. See further A.C.C. Lee, “Mothers Bewailing: Reading Lamentations,” in *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 195–210. For further examples see, Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 186–188.

89 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 158–160.

90 Hendricks, “Guerilla Exegesis,” 81.

Re-conceptualizing Identity as Hybridity

What animates contrapuntal and indigenized reading strategies is a central aim of postcolonial biblical criticism: helping the colonized rediscover “not just *what to do*—but *who we are*.”⁹¹ However, Sugirtharajah is clear that “who we are” is no longer equated with “who we were.” Ironically, Western imperialism has itself partly to thank for this development. Starting in the late fifteenth century, it inspired a robust outward-moving European diaspora. The late twentieth century has seen a reversal of that initial diaspora. Individuals and communities are now increasingly moving from the non-West into the West.⁹² This dual flow of people, coupled with technological advances, has created a world of multiple convergences. According to Said,

we have never been as aware as we now are of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the *police* action of simple dogma and loud patriotism. Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more ‘foreign’ elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude. Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from present actualities, and who in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around British London or French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities?⁹³

These rhetorical questions are telling. No one can mark out sharp distinctions in simplistic, mechanical ways.⁹⁴ Said makes clear that once impenetrable

91 Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, “Introduction,” 3. Along with the rise of reader-response, ideological criticism, and cultural studies, postcolonialism has found expression in the burgeoning field of personal-voice/autobiographical/vernacular hermeneutics. For primers on the field see Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999). Janice Capel Anderson and Jeffrey L. Staley, eds., “Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism,” special issue, *Semeia* 72 (1995).

92 For a thorough explanation of Diasporic Studies, see Segovia, “Interpreting Beyond Borders,” 11–34.

93 Ibid., 15. Said is similarly critical of nationalism, disdaining it as fetishization, though simultaneously admitting that in the early phases of national struggle it is important for galvanizing national identity. See “Interview with Edward Said,” 231–232.

94 See further, Edward W. Said, *The Myth of ‘The Clash of Civilizations’: Edward Said in Lecture*, DVD (Northampton, Mass.: Media Education Foundation, 1998).

social boundaries are now regularly crossed and crisscrossed. Cultures are fluid and permeable. According to Said, “No identity is pure, everyone counter, original, spare, strange ... We are all Others in the final analysis.”⁹⁵ Thus, the topic of human identity has become highly nuanced. Homi Bhabha, the individual most credited with elaborating and popularizing these ideas, subsumes them under the term “hybridity” (a detailed discussion to follow in chapters 3–5).⁹⁶

Identity, like knowledge, is seen as a construct. It is largely, if not entirely, formed by the cultural codes that produce meaning, which in turn order the world around us. How we think, what we think, our understanding of social structures and institutions, are all products of socialization in unique historical contexts. Beyond this basic idea, recent expressions of postcolonial biblical criticism stress that identity is marked by mutual interdependence. No longer is postcolonial thought communicated in terms of an anti-colonial mode, which sought to recapture a “pure” bygone identity.⁹⁷ Such an approach has proven overly confident in its essentializing and totalistic assumption that the cultural soul of the colonized could be reclaimed in a pre-colonial sense.⁹⁸ What post-colonial biblical criticism makes clear is that human identity throughout the colonized world has itself fundamentally changed.

Colonialism functioned on a Modern template, which demarcated identity by differentiating between those on the inside and those on the outside. Like liberation, colonialism employs its own set of stereotypes. People groups were/are categorized into Manichean binaries: rural/metropolitan, whites/blacks, Western/Oriental, pure/impure, civilized/primitive, Christian/pagan, and so on. For its part, the church under Constantine, assimilated what Cather-

95 Speech given at Mount Hermon school, quoted in William V. Spanos, *The Legacy of Edward W. Said* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 231.

96 Bhabha is critical of the nationhood concept because it reduces difference by haphazardly collectivizing all people into one. As an antidote, he suggests appropriating the mundane elements of daily life, and defining national culture through them, rather than through the dominant and authoritative national discourses. Bhabha celebrates human identity as marked by hybridity. See “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration* (ed. Homi K. Bhabha; London: Routledge, 1990), 291–322.

97 Aimé Césaire. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (ed. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith; trans. Clayton Eshleman; Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 44, 51. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 135.

98 Sugirtharajah is critical of early attempts by postcolonialists to throw off the empire's domination. These efforts amounted to anti-colonial readings that fought imperial biblical interpretation with the contaminated weaponry of the oppressors. “The earlier colonized were largely shaped by, and remained in many ways locked into, the very structure they were keen on demolishing.” Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 15.

ine Keller describes as “an idolatry of identity: a metaphysical Babel of unity, an identity that homogenizes the multiplicities it absorbs.”⁹⁹ That institution-alization stifled the energizing results created in the polyglossial community of the Pentecost. Modernity also championed assimilationism in its attempt to absorb the cultural practices of outsiders into a static cultural mode.¹⁰⁰

In postcolonial contexts, there is an honest appraisal of the often ambiguous and complex matrices defining human personality. Human identity, as it has developed in the global village, has proven to be an “irretrievably heterogeneous,”¹⁰¹ blended, discontinuous, and syncretistic reality resistant to static models, and thoroughly hyphenated. Said’s famous feud with Samuel P. Huntington over the content of his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* was based largely on a divergent opinion of human anthropology. Against Huntington’s dualistic assessment of human identity, Said responded saying, “Today’s world is in fact a world of mixtures, of migrations, and of crossings over; of boundaries traversed ... no culture or society is purely one thing.”¹⁰² In a similar fashion, postcolonialists point out how the biblical witness recalls a world that is dominated and re-dominated by imperial powers to create multicultural communities rather than untouched ones. Modern human identity, like that of our ancient ancestors, is always evolving and occupying an “in-between-space ... where one is equally committed and disturbed by the colonized and the colonizing cultures.”¹⁰³ Identity is an amalgam, a composite, a bricolage of various influences that tends to become ever more complex with each passing generation.

The essentialist “us versus them” binary, which so aided the efforts of empire,¹⁰⁴ is deemed no longer adequate because in many ways, “we” have become “them” and “they” have become “us.” Close contact over the last several hundred years have entangled and intermingled the histories of the colonized and colonizers alike. Victims of political exile and displacement, like the Cuban-born Fernando Segovia, have found that they do not fit available categories.

99 Catherine Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology in the Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (ed. Catherine Keller et al; St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 222–223.

100 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 249.

101 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1999), 270.

102 Said, *The Myth of ‘The Clash of Civilizations,’* DVD.

103 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 249.

104 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Richard Philcox; New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4–5. Said, *Orientalism*, 36, 45–46.

They are estranged, dislodged, without a dwelling, in lands not their own and in the midst of a new diaspora¹⁰⁵ marked by victimization on various levels. As Elleke Boehmer states, these are scholars who see double.¹⁰⁶

Identities are being amalgamated as populations experience the collision of cultures at work in urban centers that are simultaneously growing and drawing in the periphery. In a world of ever-increasing interconnectedness, the ideal of a vernacular culture unalloyed by outsiders has proven a utopian pipe dream.¹⁰⁷ This is why postcolonial biblical criticism, along with other global modes of reading (e.g. Latin American, African, Asian), is fond of redeploying the Babel story of Gen 11 to articulate, not merely a fall from grace, but a critique of imperial building projects and a celebration of multivocal existence.¹⁰⁸

This nuanced understanding of identity as commingled and porous serves to further preclude the historical-critical scholar from proposing a one-size-fits-all reading. Human identity, now more than ever, is formed out of a unique constellation of cross-cultural and transnational, contacts. What is found in postcolonial biblical criticism is a model (wily as it is) that takes seriously the multifaceted nature of those who read texts and that engages in identity-hermeneutics. It does not rest easily in one locale but is the product of various places. It is the result of the ongoing dispute between the First and Third World.¹⁰⁹

The reader (along with his/her community) is, therefore, no longer universalized or considered disinterested. The full complement of his/her positioned status is taken into account. He/she is celebrated as a historically-enveloped,

105 The category of diaspora is a regular feature of postcolonial biblical criticism. Segovia is arguably its leading proponent. See Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Also see: Segovia, "Two Places and No Place on Which to Stand: Mixture and Otherness in Hispanic American Theology," in *Hispanic Americans in Theology and the Church* (ed. F.F. Segovia, special issue of *List* 27:1 [Winter 1992]): 26–40. Segovia, "Aliens in the Promised Land: The Manifest Destiny of U.S. Hispanic American Theology," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise* (ed. A.M. Isasi-Díaz and F.F. Segovia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 15–42. For a survey of key ideas see Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 179–199.

106 Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 10–111.

107 Ibid., 200–201. See further, R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Vernacular Resurrections: An Introduction" in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 15–16.

108 For example, see John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

109 Sugirtharajah, "Charting the Aftermath," 16.

politically engaged, ethnic, gendered, racial, local, socio-educational, socio-religious, value-driven, ideological product.¹¹⁰ Social awareness and commitments are to be cultivated, not muted. In this way, contextual/global hermeneutics practice a brand of “fierce self-esteem.”¹¹¹

Readers interact with the biblical text through the cultural/ideological tools available to them. Textual meaning, therefore, emerges from the constant interaction of text and reader as they reflect one another in a dynamic and ongoing interchange. The text is understood to be polysemic and multivalent since readers themselves have the potential to be quite diverse. Rather than searching for a definitive singular meaning, there is openness to textual ambiguity¹¹² within which the overall goal is to understand the broad spectrum of interpretive possibilities.¹¹³ Meaning is not a fixed object to be contained and controlled. Meaning is sourced from a vast reservoir and therefore is always in flux, always in process.¹¹⁴ Sugirtharajah agrees, stating that the act of interpretation is recast as “a process, not an achievement.”¹¹⁵ For these approaches, texts have no meaning outside of the hermeneutist’s mental frameworks.¹¹⁶ Meaning is not an inert universal, but rather, it is chameleon-like.¹¹⁷

Identity, both individual and corporate, is recast as radically indeterminate. It is fluid and dynamic. It is no wonder that the advancement of critical reading strategies, like postcolonial biblical criticism and others, has taken hold in North America, a context defined largely by settler populations.¹¹⁸

110 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 39, 47.

111 R.S. Sugirtharajah, “Thinking about Vernacular Hermeneutics Sitting in a Metropolitan Study” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 94.

112 John Goldingay offers that the historical approach to interpretation not only lacks consensus outcomes among its adherents, but that it falls victim to the problem of “asking questions whose answers the text by definition conceals.” John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 19–20, 39–41.

113 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 104. See further, Segovia, “Hispanic,” *DTWT* 23–24. See further Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 84.

114 J. Severino Croatto was among the first to make this connection. See his important discussion of liberation hermeneutics in *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (trans. Salvator Attanasio; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

115 Sugirtharajah, “Margins and Mainstream,” 165.

116 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 151.

117 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 6–7.

118 Dube, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretations,” 362.

*From Hermeneutical Symphony to Hermeneutical Jazz: The
Interdisciplinary Nature of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*

Postcolonial biblical criticism calls biblical scholars to disassociate from the belief that each text contains a singular, knowable, and ultimately accessible meaning. No solitary interpretive philosophy is sufficient. An eclectic collection of tools is necessary to engage the multiaxial¹¹⁹ nature of both the biblical text and its diverse readership. To this end, it is careful to define itself as “an optic, not *the* optic, in full engagement and dialogue with a host of other models and other optics.”¹²⁰ Postcolonial biblical criticism therefore is not a wholesale invention of a new method, as much as it is an approach to texts that borrows cooperatively from existing methods, blending them into a potent interdisciplinary mixture.¹²¹ Postcolonialism is accepting of other approaches, even traditional ones, so long as they are refocused to serve the needs of oppressed communities.¹²²

The fact that postcolonial biblical criticism advocates a dynamic *mélange* that combines and cross-pollinates many interpretive philosophies protects it from re-inscribing itself as superior to other methods. Yet, as Segovia states, postcolonial biblical criticism does not succumb to the temptation of harmonization. For example, the approach is careful not to collapse the differences between resistance discourses (Marxist, feminist, etc.) into what Segovia calls the “ideal of a cosmopolitics,” but rather, allows for “conflictive” dialogue between even these peripheral reading stances.¹²³

Recent expressions of postcolonial biblical criticism are careful not to denigrate or call for the abandonment of historical-critical or literary methodologies. Third World biblical scholars have not only critiqued historical-critical methodology, they have also deployed it as a means for understanding

119 Kwok, “Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World,” 79.

120 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 131.

121 The interdisciplinary impulse moves beyond the scope of biblical studies and is evinced in the diversity of postcolonialist scholars doing biblical interpretation. The landmark publishing of *Semeia* 75 prominently features the writings of English professors. John W. Marshall even suggests the implementation of what he calls “historical-critical postcolonialism.” See “Postcolonialism and the Practice of History,” in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 93–108.

122 Sugirtharajah adds, “It is more an avenue of inquiry than a homogenous project ... It thrives on inclusiveness, and is attracted to all kinds of tools and disciplinary fields, as long as they probe injustices, produce new knowledge which problematizes well-entrenched positions and enhance the lives of the marginalized.” *The Bible and the Third World*, 258.

123 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 140.

the text.¹²⁴ Notably, Sugirtharajah reminds us that historical criticism itself emerged in Europe as a liberating option combating “the absolutist theological and ecclesiastical readings of the time and made Christianity and its origins and traditions earthy, questionable and humane.”¹²⁵ Historical criticism holds the text in high regard and seeks to protect it from any misreading that would pluck it from its contexts.¹²⁶ Moreover, historical-critical methodologies rightly uphold a degree of formalism and a sense of hermeneutical distance between the world of the Bible and that of modern readers.¹²⁷ The distancing common to historical criticism guards against slipshod analogies of proximity drawn by indigenous interpreters¹²⁸ who might otherwise dissolve the “otherness” of the text itself or, ironically, forget that interpretations are fundamentally constructions made by the reader.¹²⁹

Literary criticism, with its attention to formalist literary features, also respects the text’s Otherness. Furthermore, John Collins points out that the regimented way in which the historical focus operates has established shared assumptions among different kinds of readers, thus allowing for cross-disciplinary dialogue between them.¹³⁰ It is nearsighted to package historical-critical methodology as a great evil. It is not in postcolonial biblical criticism’s purview to entirely displace or dislocate traditional methods. Rather, it seeks to compliment and coexist with them in a spirit of mutual respect. There is direct conflict only when such methods threaten to know a text exclusively.¹³¹

Indeed, postcolonialists advocate that a comprehensive analysis of biblical texts cannot stand to ignore the whole gamut of hermeneutical programs. Current and future generations of scholars will need to continually familiarize themselves with the reading styles of both the center and periphery, seeking to become generalists conversant with various theoretical threads and capable

124 Sugirtharajah, “Bible,” *DTWT*, 14.

125 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 86–87.

126 *Ibid.*, 87.

127 Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*, 344. See further, 248, 249. Also see Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 11.

128 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 225. See further *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 87–88. For more discussion on distancing in biblical studies, see Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 226, 259–260, 304–305.

129 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 11.

130 Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, 10.

131 A.K.M. Adam, “Postmodern Biblical Interpretation,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 174.

of traversing their dialectical dimensions. Traditionally-trained scholars may find it increasingly more difficult to engage in dialogue without understanding the various impulses behind globalization and the diasporic hermeneutical dialects it has engendered. Like their postmodern counterparts, they too will need to create interdisciplinary alliances and embrace a more pluralistic perspective that will result in the creation of a vibrant mixture. As a result, Vincent Wimbush is adamant that the study of scriptures cannot be limited to the scope of a single authoritative field, even if that field is religion.¹³²

It appears that the days of isolated and cloistered exegetical models are behind us. What now exists is an expansive catalog of reading styles, each with its own unique sets of presuppositions, aims, and outcomes. The scholar and student are now called to a greater degree of both methodological and global awareness. Or, as Segovia says of such individuals, they will be a breed capable of “speaking in other tongues.”¹³³ What postcolonial biblical criticism calls for are readers knowledgeable in a kind of “metatheory” that encompasses the diverse spectrum of methodological approaches along with the interrelationships between them.¹³⁴ And yet, Segovia is aware of the challenges facing today’s students. He reminds them that comprehensive understanding of every reading paradigm will be impossible. Rather, the goal should be to achieve “informed awareness,” indeed “a working sophistication sufficient enough to follow and interact with a number of particular lines of argumentation, to engage in border crossings so to speak.”¹³⁵

Borrowing from Stephanie Mitchem’s insightful analogy for Womanist theology, the emerging scholar will need to resemble the unpredictability¹³⁶ and

132 Vincent L. Wimbush, “TEXTureS, Gestures, Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation,” in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (ed. Vincent L. Wimbush; New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 16. Wimbush adds, “The study of ‘scriptures,’ therefore, must be open to all those who would try to understand human beings—their languages, rhythms, rituals, performances, orientations, their collective psyches, power relations, their fears, pain, ecstasies, and aspirations.” *Ibid.*, 16. See further Susanne Scholz, “‘Tandoori Reindeer’ and the Limitations of Historical Criticism,” in *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 47–69.

133 Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 33.

134 *Ibid.*, 49, 101–103.

135 *Ibid.*, 101.

136 Hendricks describes the volatile nature of his reading style as “Guerilla Exegesis.” “It is transgressive, a transgressive stance. Sometimes smooth quick deceptive with pin-point accuracy like Sugar Ray Robinson, sometimes bullish blunt straight-ahead like Joe Frazier.

mastery of a jazz musician.¹³⁷ Unlike classical music's dependence on sheet music, or better yet, the singular interpretation of the conductor, jazz is more of a collaborative, impromptu effort depending on both the creativity and skill of the individual artists. Jazz aficionados are familiar with the sequence of events in the concert setting. At some point in the program, the musicians will jam. Here the music is intuitive, improvisational, and organic as each member of the band takes his/her turn at musical expression. In order to move freely outside the written music, the musician must be supremely talented with her/his instrument *and* understand the capabilities, limits, and possibilities of those played by their band mates.

So too, postcolonial biblical scholars and theologians advocate the need to be highly trained analytical thinkers who are intimately aware of traditional issues and methodologies if they are to occasionally divert from them in an effective manner. Their training will also do well to include a working familiarity with various sets of cross-cultural data and lived experiences. Cultural competence, along with methodological proficiency, are considered essential elements to producing well-rounded scholars. These are scholars for whom elasticity is a virtue to be embraced, not a vice to be resisted. These are thinkers who are simultaneously rooted in the tower and the turnpike. As Hendricks states, these are "solid but subversive scholars."¹³⁸

For postcolonial biblical criticism, the above analogy is especially helpful for combating the usual critique that contextual theologies are on the whole irresponsible, reckless, or uncritical reading models. Indeed, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin indicate more generally about the field of "post-colonialism"¹³⁹ the fact that it has created a "radical instability of meaning" should not count against it. This quality brings to the discipline an energetic liveliness that should be numbered as an important strength.¹⁴⁰ Postcolonial biblical criticism reassesses what counts as academically rigorous. It believes that mastering a quantified body of knowledge is no longer the ideal. Better, it is the ability to interact with disparate views that is set in relief. As N.T. Wright says generally

Eclectic. Sometimes float like a butterfly, toe-to-toe in the center of the ring and rope-a-dope-ing all in the same round." Hendricks, "Guerilla Exegesis," 79.

137 Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), 78–79.

138 Hendricks, "Guerilla Exegesis," 88.

139 They opt for the hyphenated term but define the field in an all-encompassing way "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day." *The Empire Writes Back*, 2.

140 *Ibid.*, 196.

of Scripture reading, “All musicians know, improvisation does not at all mean a free-for-all where ‘anything goes,’ but precisely a disciplined and careful listening to all the other voices around us, and a constant attention to the themes, rhythms and harmonies of the complete performance so far, the performance which we are now called to continue.”¹⁴¹

Conclusion

Any attempt to describe the shape of such an amorphous approach must admit, as already stated, a degree of narrowness from the outset. Unlike the linearity of historical-critical methodology with its well-known and generally agreed-upon definitions, postcolonial biblical criticism offers a more pliable alternative. The term itself is largely dependent on the particular context of the given postcolonial thinker. Vinoth Ramachandra reminds us that the wider discipline of postcolonialism is in need of qualifiers which “like patriarchy and racism, is articulated alongside other economic, social, cultural and historical factors, and therefore, in practice, it works differently in different parts of the world.”¹⁴²

For instance, Fernando Segovia, a Cuban-born New Testament scholar living in North America understands the shape of colonialism as being heavily influenced by U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean. The often-cited hermeneutist, R.S. Sugirtharajah, is a Sri Lankan teaching and writing in Birmingham, England. He understands colonial forces from the historical experience of English domination in Asian contexts. Musa Dube, of Botswana, writes from the unique perspective of multi-alienated black-African women. For each, colonialism is made manifest in different ways, and so, engaging in postcolonial biblical criticism will inevitably reflect these differences of scholarly locale and personal background.¹⁴³ As Stephen Bevans states, “There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only *contextual* theology.”¹⁴⁴

Given this intense regionalism, it is perhaps more appropriate to gloss the wider field in the plural, as criticisms.¹⁴⁵ It naturally follows that deciding on a

141 N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 93.

142 Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping our World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 240.

143 See Segovia and Tolbert, *Reading from This Place Volume 2*.

144 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007), 3.

145 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 193.

“standard” definition is a limited enterprise, perhaps yielding only shadows of the total picture. Sugirtharajah’s following explanation of the term reveals its rich, albeit enigmatic, essence:

[Postcolonialism] implies the political and ideological stance of an interpreter who is engaged in anti-colonial and anti-globalizing theory and praxis ... it seeks to uncover colonial designs in both biblical texts and their interpretations, and endeavors to read the text from such postcolonial concerns as identity, hybridity and diaspora. Unlike the current biblical scholarship produced, invigorated and contained by virtuous aspects of the Enlightenment and modernity, postcolonialism concentrates on the vicious aspects of modernity—colonialism and how its legacy influenced and informed the promotion of the Bible and the development of biblical interpretation.¹⁴⁶

Elsewhere he declares it to be

a textual and praxiological practice initially undertaken by people who were once part of the British, European and American Empires, but now have some sort of territorial freedom while continuing to live with burdens from the past and enduring newer forms of economic and cultural neocolonialism. It was also undertaken by ethnic minorities who live in diaspora, namely British blacks and British Asians in England, and racial minorities in the United States and Canada—African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans—who had been victims of old imperialism, who are now current victims of globalization and who have been continually kept away from and represented by the dominant First World elements. Postcolonialism involves investigation into various colonial archives and discussion on a variety of issues ranging from slavery to migration, from gender to ethnic matters. Postcolonial criticism tries to conquer the past by comprehending it, and to overpower the present by exorcizing it.¹⁴⁷

This pair of definitions from the field’s preeminent voice brings to light three valuable trajectories. In one direction, postcolonial biblical criticism means

146 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 4. NB: Sugirtharajah, and others, use the general term “postcolonialism” as a referent for what I have been calling, more specifically, postcolonial biblical criticism.

147 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 246–247.

reading against the hegemonic powers of the dominant classes. It demands a double interrogation, first of static interpretations, then of the text itself. It is a critical *confrontation* and *discursive stance against* dominant knowledge systems responsible for influencing understanding. Moving in another direction, its aim is to shed light on the dynamics of power as they have been used as tools for subjugation. It is a rereading style that seeks to liberate people (outside and inside the text) from a variety of imprisonments. Finally, postcolonial biblical criticism attempts to detect, reclaim, redeem, and reinstate indigenous cultural accents. Listening for the voices of those considered Other is not a tangential component within the task of interpretation, it is an indispensable element of *authentic* interpretation.

An Incomplete Picture: The Book of Exodus in Postcolonial Discourse

Introduction

Once dominated by North Atlantic theological centers, the study of Exodus was freshly articulated in Third World contexts beginning in the 1960s.¹ This was a decade marked by a growing awareness of economic oppression. Significant misgivings about the promises of economic development for the sake of the poor were expressed in the form of papal encyclicals and in important ecclesial gatherings held in Latin America. Landmark documents included *Mater et Magistra* (1961)² and *Populorum Progressio* (1967).³ Both conveyed anxiety about the ever-expanding chasm between the First and Two-Thirds World. The former publication advocated for full human dignity by advancing the need for workers' rights and more equitable wealth distribution. The latter sharply critiqued economic disparities that accompany capitalist societies.⁴

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1966), CELAM I (the general conference of the Latin American episcopacy, Rio de Janeiro, 1955), and the Medellín conference (CELAM II, Colombia, 1968) identified the plight of the downtrodden as having surpassed brutality on an individual level. Medellín attendees diagnosed the plight of the poor with the now famous expression, “institutionalized violence”; a phrase intended to describe the ways in which political and religious organizations contribute to the creation of oppressive social structures.

CELAM II is widely considered the birthdate of Latin American liberation theology. In his analysis, Deane William Ferm identifies two phrases that encapsulate the conference. The first captured the desperation felt by many: “By its own vocation Latin America will undertake its liberation at the cost

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- 1 A review of Exodus's multiple theological perspectives can be found in Bas van Iersel and Anton Weiler, eds., *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987).
 - 2 Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress* (ed. Donald R. Campion and Eugene K. Culhane; New York: America Press, 1961).
 - 3 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1967).
 - 4 For a diagnosis of capitalism's abuses see José P. Miranda *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (trans. John Eagleson; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974), 1–33.

of whatever sacrifice.”⁵ The second centers on economic inequalities and describes God’s preferential option for the poor: “The Lord’s distinct commandment to ‘evangelize the poor’ ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors.”⁶ To these ends, theologians and clergy members committed to the poor sought to deploy the biblical text in ways that would contribute to the cause of comprehensive human freedom. For them, liberation was not merely a spiritual reality; it was a material and sociopolitical one as well.

Interest in Exodus was sparked by readers who saw in its pages more than a foundational story of Israel’s Iron Age national origins, but rather, a God who promised to dismantle the oppressive machinery of lethal regimes in all times. Moses’ triumphant imperative “Let my people go!” (Exod 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3) could not be reserved exclusively for the ancient Israelites. The call for freedom must be recaptured and made to reverberate for *all* people. The Exodus narratives became the fertile interpretive soil out of which a new hermeneutic was emerging. The impoverished saw in Exodus an alluring story of suffering assuaged, justice upheld, and the positive potential for divine interruption. For them, the biblical text radiated emancipatory possibilities. The God of the Bible was not aloof but intimately engaged in social and political spheres to bring forward an array of freedom-making priorities. As Robert McAfee Brown bluntly characterizes this divine commitment, “God takes sides.”⁷ If the text of Exodus was testimony of YHWH’s divine bias, then those who sought to emulate YHWH must themselves choose a side. The faithful would align with the liberating YHWH against the tyrannical governments of all would-be “Pharaohs.”

In Latin America, the Exodus story stimulated the formation of contemporary analogues. The Egyptian monarch exchanged his royal robes for the political attire of corrupt Latin American diplomats, officials, and politicians. Ancient taskmasters were recast as modern-day clerics trying to subdue and control the laboring masses.⁸ The passage of God’s people through the perilous sea and desert was equated to the passage of the subordinate from inhuman

5 Deane William Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 11.

6 Ibid.

7 Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 33–48.

8 For a summary of liberation’s analogical reading stance see Stephen J. Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 11.

conditions to those of increased knowledge, cultural mobility, dignity, common cooperation, peace, and ultimately, faith.⁹ Third World readers and theologians saw the solution for social ills coming in the form of a liberating YHWH. Exodus was not merely an antiquated story trapped on the pages of Scripture, it was a *paradigmatic* text to be re-actualized under present-day circumstances. Fundamentally, Exodus communicates God's eternal vocation: that of a liberator.

The work of liberation theology has made Exodus a key text for many interpretive programs seeking to advance issues of social justice. However, as the previous chapter in this project has made clear, decades of hindsight have revealed that liberation theology tended to appropriate the book of Exodus reductively. That is, liberation's treatment of Exodus reflected the modernistic methodological and theological commitments of its Euroamerican practitioners. Liberation suffocates the tale's liminal figures and themes, is unflinchingly textualist, homogenizes and romanticizes the poor, and preserves strict binary language. Liberation's preoccupation with a superficial and selective reading of Exodus failed to account for the political effects that its interpretation would have for today's displaced and uprooted populations.¹⁰ Well-meaning as they were, liberation theologians looked down the hermeneutical well only to see their own reflection.

Nevertheless, the importance of Exodus does not seem to have been diluted by these limitations. One can see this, for example, in R.S. Sugirtharajah's edited volume *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*.¹¹ Among the book's thirty-five articles ranging from subaltern, to postcolonial, to inter-textual and popular categories, only Exodus is given its own major section. Within it, a spectrum of hermeneutical angles is represented. Included are Latin American, Asian feminist, Palestinian, Native American, Filipino American, and African American perspectives.¹² As a whole the collection gives rise to a pair of observations. First, it reveals that Exodus maintains powerful

9 *Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops: The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979), 28.

10 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 118.

11 R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006).

12 The previous edition (1995) included two articles that have been omitted in the current version. They are: Cyris H.S. Moon, "A Korean Minjung Perspective: The Hebrews and the Exodus," and Jean-Marc Ela, "A Black African Perspective: An African Reading of Exodus," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), 228–243, 244–254 (respectively).

hermeneutical purchase for global reading communities. Additionally, the section teaches that not all reading communities echo the positivistic appraisal of the liberation generation. Some of the articles reflect that Exodus is being newly scrutinized by postmodern and non-confessional traditions. In what may be intentional symmetry, half of the six articles read for the story's murky underbelly. According to Sugirtharajah, "What has become increasingly clear is that the Exodus narrative that was once a driving discursive force behind many resistance movements has now come to be seen as an uneasy scriptural resource."¹³

John Collins has noticed this different intonation. He points out that Exodus is being uniquely appreciated for its "dark side" by postcolonial scholarship.¹⁴ Exodus's shadowy dimensions also trouble Sugirtharajah. If, as he has stated, a goal of postcolonial biblical criticism is "to demonstrate that the Bible is part of the conundrum rather than a panacea for all the ills of a postmodern world,"¹⁵ then the discipline has given shape to that conundrum by locating elements that disturb the traditional reading of Exodus's benevolent God. For example, the usual dovetailing of oppressed reader and Israelite protagonists is called into question, as are other seeming contradictions and paradoxes. At times the tale resists oppression, at times, one may argue, there are instructions for its implementation. At times peripheral characters are prominently elevated while at other times they are subsumed.

Read in conjunction with Joshua, YHWH frees a suffering people only to incongruously authorize further suffering by their hand. The ethos of freedom is undercut by the calls to exact punishment on fellow outsiders. Thus, for some readers ensconced in the wider postcolonial fold, the God of the Exodus narrative is nothing more than a xenophobic, bloodthirsty taker of property and people. Postcolonial biblical criticism makes evident that the cultural assumptions of ancient authors are in need of constant examination, refining, and at times, even rejection.

These rather vehement conclusions are the result of little scholarly work. Postcolonialists who have published on Exodus are few. The only figures dealing with Exodus as more than a passing reference are, sequentially, the renowned Edward W. Said, the Native American theologian Robert Allen Warrior, and more recently, Musa W. Dube and Gale A. Yee. None has written more than

13 Sugirtharajah, introduction to *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 7.

14 Collins lists the problems of Canaanite conquest, ethnocentrism, and Israel's election. *The Bible After Babel*, 69–72.

15 *Ibid.*, 119.

article-length analyses. Of the foursome only Dube and Yee write from a contemporary postcolonial angle. Working in the current millennium, and well after the production of theory roadmaps, Dube and Yee's arguments are more attuned to the specialized parlance of the field. Both attend to the book's colonial embroilments while also commenting on gender dimensions, which their predecessors do not address.

Writing in the 1980s, neither Said nor Warrior are as aware of the dense theoretical categories that would emerge in the decades that followed. Nevertheless, their articles are considered canonical. In virtually every postcolonial reference to Exodus, one or both of these authors appear unchallenged. Given the seminal importance of their writings, a description and assessment of their work, along with that of Dube and Yee, is in order. This will put us in a position to expand on their thinking in the chapters that follows.

Edward W. Said on Exodus

The first scholar of the modern era to entertain as so-called "Canaanite reading" of Exodus is in fact the venerated progenitor of postcolonialism, Edward W. Said. His interest in Exodus arises from a philosophical reaction and political resistance to Michael Walzer's 1985 book, *Exodus and Revolution*.¹⁶ In it Walzer traces the outlines of what he terms "Exodus politics." At the heart of Walzer's thesis is the idea that Exodus is a paradigm story for modern political action and liberation. The story in Exodus, argues Walzer, serves as the precedent, goal, and standard to which political movements must aspire. It is, as he describes, "the first description of revolutionary politics."¹⁷

Despite Walzer's confession that he is no expert in the field of biblical criticism, Said still deems Walzer's exegesis of the narrative simplistic, exclusionist, and self-authorizing.¹⁸ For Said, Walzer's presentation of Exodus is neat, linear, and incessantly progressive and positivistic,¹⁹ not to mention anachronistic in its casual association of ancient Israel with the Zionist Israeli government of the contemporary period.²⁰ Said maintains that Walzer reduces Exodus to

16 Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

17 Ibid., 134.

18 Edward W. Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*: A Canaanite Reading" in *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (eds. Edward W. Said and Christopher Hitchens; London: Verso, 1988), 161–178.

19 Ibid., 161, 163–164.

20 Ibid., 173.

the familiar but unsatisfactory binary of oppressed and oppressor. For example, Said cites textual material in Gen 46 and 47 to assert that the Hebrew clan travels to Egypt on invitation and, in part, to seek and find fortune. Ancient Hebrews, argues Said, were not the underclass that Walzer makes them out to be, nor should they be equated to African Americans or Latin Americans as liberation theology has done.²¹

Walzer's superficial appraisal, Said affirms, is most troubling for what goes nearly unstated. In a rebuttal to Said, Walzer makes only a glancing mention of the Torah's extermination texts. Since peaceful infiltration comprises the historical veracity of the exodus event, Walzer encourages a metaphorical assessment of the story. Exodus cannot be read literally or analogically as a pretext for harming others.²² Said is not swayed. He cannot see past the text's endorsement of violence. At its most strident points, Exodus calls for the unforgiving annihilation of the Other, by which Said usually means Palestinian peoples.²³ The gift of redemption, Said writes, is "extremely problematic" because it secures only the needs of some.²⁴

Said is critical of Walzer's methodology. Never does Walzer give a thorough account of troubling texts. Said writes, "Walzer offers no detailed, explicit or principled resistance to the irreducibly sectarian premises of Exodus, still less to the notion of a God as sanguinary as Jahweh [sic] directly holding them in place."²⁵ For Said, Walzer's book is written by the victors of history and not meant for those on its undersides. Walzer's appraisal of Exodus as an origination or inaugural myth is therefore unsatisfactory.

In spite of Said's rather innovative subtitle (*A Canaanite Reading*), his analysis of Walzer does not move beyond the stage of simple critique. Never does Said inaugurate the "Canaanite Reading" promised. Said does not engage the

21 Ibid., 165.

22 See "An Exchange: Michael Walzer and Edward Said," *GrS* 5 (1986): 246–259. Walzer, like Said, argues that he has been unfairly caricatured. Walzer maintains that the same is true of Jewish politics, which has been cast as something static and fundamentalist.

23 Naim Stifan Ateek offers a similar perspective. He argues that the Old Testament has fallen out of favor among Palestinian Christians for the ways in which politicized readings have come to support Zionism. For him, the revelation of Jesus Christ offers the hermeneutic for reading the violence texts of the Old Testament. If a picture of violence does not align with the revelation of Jesus Christ, it is to be rejected and considered without authority. See *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 77–86.

24 Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*," 177.

25 Ibid., 167. See further, 169.

Exodus text itself; he simply dismisses it as Walzer does. In his derisive counter to Walzer's response, Said concludes a string of putdowns by calling Walzer "an amateur mythographer, a champion of the strong," and in lines that follow, "a small frightened man who is completely unequal to the question of Canaan-Palestine, and barely adequate for the easier bits of Exodus."²⁶

The irony of this scathing final salvo is clear to see. While Said excoriates Walzer for presenting an unexamined image of Exodus, he similarly fails to scrutinize it himself, settling only for identifying the dimensions that he finds deplorable. Likewise, in his review of the Walzer-Said exchange, Mark Walhout bemoans the underdeveloped nature of Said's thinking. For Walhout, Said fails to discuss ways in which the Bible may serve as resource for his Palestinian community.²⁷

Said is no biblical scholar and does not pretend to be. In this sense, both he and Walzer are quite alike. Regardless, Said is an astute literary scholar who, regrettably, fails to engage the text with the considerable interpretive tools at his disposal. A more thorough analysis of the complex subject is presented in the work of Warrior.

Robert Allen Warrior on Exodus

Laura Donaldson, a prominent postcolonial scholar and editor of the first of two influential *Semeia* collections on postcolonial biblical criticism (75 and 88), asserts that a canonical reading of Exodus is simply inappropriate. Traditional readings silence the voice of the Canaanites whose persistent existence undercuts the larger message of liberation. The notion of a liberating God is *not* good news for all.²⁸ Donaldson cites as the basis of this claim Warrior's oft-cited article, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today."²⁹ In the article, Warrior catalogues his trepidation with Exodus. Warrior is troubled by the ways in which the story instructs and authorizes the confiscation of territory and the cruel treatment of non-Israelites. This God, celebrated for taking the side of justice and human dignity, ironically, if

26 William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), 199.

27 Mark Walhout, "The *Intifada* of the Intellectuals: An Ecumenical Perspective on the Walzer-Said Exchange," in *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice* (ed. Susan VanZanten Gallagher; Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 213.

28 Donaldson, "Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading," 10–12.

29 Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 261–265.

not schizophrenically, shifts from saving underdogs to endorsing totalitarian takeover and the enslavement of innocents. The looming problematic of liberationist rhetoric, argues Warrior, is that it does not account for those who find themselves on the sharp end of the colonial spear.

As a member of the Osage Nation of Native Americans, Warrior cannot help but see the plight of *his* people in the Bible's derided Canaanite populations.³⁰ His central critique focuses on the partisan elevation of Israelites over and against all non-Israelites. By parsing Exodus for episodes of autochthonous presence and exclusion, Warrior decenters dominant liberation readings in favor of an aboriginal perspective. For him, YHWH's promise to deliver a people came at the steep price of aggressive dispossession. The YHWH of deliverance, argues Warrior, becomes the YHWH of conquest and merciless annihilation.³¹ Warrior concedes that the scholarly guild does not read the conquest narratives as literal accounts of historical events. He is aware that biblical scholarship is more apt to debate the efficacy of various emergence models than it is to persist in a *prima facie* reading of a lightning-quick military campaign. Notwithstanding the nuanced explanations of Exodus's complex historicity, Warrior is still deeply troubled by the literature as it is. He writes, "For historical knowledge does not change the status of the indigenes in the *narrative* and the theology that grows out of it."³² Neither do the historical explanations "resolve the narrative problem."³³ The danger rests in the resulting ideology, not in the event's happening or non-happening.

Warrior is disturbed by the nature of the narratives themselves. He is also uneasy about the likelihood that they will be misused. Undiscerning readers, unaware of the vital distinction between text as narrative and the text as unfiltered historical record, run a serious risk. He fears that such readers will adopt the story of Exodus and Joshua uncritically, as justification to oppress present-day outsiders. Warrior is also uneasy about the Genesis promises that vouchsafe not only land, but also the expulsion of others. Especially worrisome

30 George "Tink" Tinker agrees. For him, American Indians will always see themselves as the aboriginal Canaanite owners of the invaded land, for "the Indian reading of Exodus will always raise hackles, because Indians will always identify with the Canaanites as indigenous, colonized peoples." "The Bible as a Text in Cultures: Native Americans," in *The Peoples' Bible* (ed. Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 45.

31 Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 262–265.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 262. See also James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 62.

are materials that sanction methods for ethnic cleansing (Gen 15:13–14, 18–21; Exod 3:17; 20–23; Deut 7–9).

Moreover, Warrior reflects on a further troubling element. If, as historians postulate, early Israel was largely comprised of Canaanites, then it is quite sad that the Exodus text turns on its own when it vilifies non-Israelites. A text that once voiced the hope for liberation of a partly Canaanite people has been revised to make *them* into literary enemies. As Warrior puts it, the assimilated Canaanites “came to be regarded as suspect and a danger to the safety of Israel. In short, they were betrayed.”³⁴

The essay concludes with constructive proposals and general reflections for the future of Christian theologizing. Most helpful is Warrior’s suggestion that the Canaanites be at the forefront of Christian reflection, be it theological or political, naming them and the land as the two last ignored textual voices. Second, he alerts the reader to the influence of conquest ideology as a shaping force in the American imagination. This violent legacy must be resisted. Lastly, Warrior asks if Exodus can be a story for Canaanites of all kinds, given that this ancient people was assimilated and their ancestral identity ultimately rejected. He wonders if the Native American Christian can fully accept the Exodus in light of the conquest narratives in which YHWH’s deliverance comes at the cost of conquest. Ultimately, Warrior advocates that to read as a Canaanite is to abandon the story of Exodus as a liberating narrative in lieu of alternative sources for peace and justice.

Warrior’s work is to be much commended. For one, he indirectly questions the boundaries of literary units in his refusal to make the conquest stories the forgotten epilogue of the Torah. Much like Martin Noth discovering Deuteronomy’s themes operative in the historical corpus, Warrior redefines the conclusion of the Exodus tale by suggesting that its climactic end, whether one takes it to be the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18) or the filling of the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–38), is in fact not fully concluded until the conquest. Moreover, he exposes the seductive lure of reading the Bible unidirectionally. Warrior sensitizes the interpreter to the influences of modern context as he makes the case that biblical scholarship has uncritically sided with Israel to the detriment of other groups. This myopic focus carries the potential of disparaging today’s Native American, Palestinian, and Aboriginal populations in ways that lean toward the duplication of domination in wholesale ways.³⁵ He warns that interpretations can calcify if left un-monitored by various reading communities.

34 Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 264.

35 Mary Ann Tolbert, “The Reproduction of Domination,” *USQR* 59 (2005): 9–14.

Despite not referencing postcolonial philosophical theory per se, the fact that Warrior problematizes a familiar text and shares his unease with liberation's occluded brand of exegesis has won him consistent cross-references among postcolonial biblical scholars. His argument stays closely fixed on the issue of narrative effects over that of historical veracity. Again, for Warrior, historical workarounds that reconstruct an underlying history (e.g. Gottwald) and name the text a political fantasy of what could have been (but certainly was not) do not untangle the narrative problem of the conquest stories. Neither do these explanations mitigate the tragic afterlives of texts. Scholarly disclaimers that appeal to "what really happened" do little to divest the danger of the final form and its multiple appropriations.

If we follow Warrior's proposal to dismiss historical models and examine the text as narrative, we are still left with an important problem. Warrior's central limitation comes in the failure to address exilic and postexilic ideological agendas at work in the construction of the *narrative* accounts themselves. Historical models work out the relationship between text and historical events described but do not address the history of the moment of composition. It is vital to recall that the Torah's traditioning process began to congeal under Babylonian and Persian domination, during the late exilic and postexilic periods. The Deuteronomistic historians redacted Israel's founding stories largely in response to surrounding imperial and in order to unify a fragile national identity. Most scholars of the First Testament maintain that the conquest narratives are interwoven with Deuteronomistic ideology. In light of this entwining, Warrior cannot dismiss history and affirm the narrative as troubling while also failing to explore how the narrative is itself the product of a history in which its writers are in a position that mirrors the position of the narrative's Canaanites.

The texts that Warrior critiques were written/redacted by a people in no position to oppress others and utterly overdetermined by international superpowers. Warrior does not see that the rhetoric of violence posited in the text is likely hyperbolic. Certainly it matters that exilic and postexilic redactors are attempting to galvanize Jewish identity in the face of imperial invasion and suzerainty through the Exodus and conquest narratives. It is also notable that the archaeological record does not substantiate a swift military campaign on the order of Joshua 6–12. The conquest narratives must be read in light of the possibility that the exilic Yehud colony may be attempting to legitimize their land claim. Yet Warrior seems content to emphasize and re-emphasize the story on the narrative level. To go beyond this surface exploration is to encounter roadblocks that he is either unaware of or that he willfully overlooks to make his argument cohere.

Warrior, like the liberationists he critiques, reads Exodus and Joshua in the proverbial vacuum. In fact, he only reads portions of those books in a vacuum. He dismisses the radically less triumphalistic account of conquest in Judg 1, surmising simply that “the Canaanites are held in no higher esteem.”³⁶ As in Said, no regard is given to Other dimensions. For instance, what of texts that include enemy figures functioning as allies? Naturally the benevolent work of Pharaoh’s daughter comes to mind, as does the ingenuity and courage of Rahab in the Joshua narrative. What of figures who are neither oppressed nor oppressor such as Moses’ Midianite wife Zipporah or her sage father Jethro? Within the two texts Warrior most often cites (Exodus and Joshua) positive Canaanite and foreign figures are treated with humanity and complexity. Ironically, to suggest that the Exodus story is inappropriate for Canaanites actually obscures their presence within it. In effect, Said and Warrior fall victim to the same critiques affecting Walzer and liberation theology: a failure to read *all* of the text.

Musa W. Dube on Exodus

Musa W. Dube has more recently proposed her own postcolonial reading of Exodus. Her analysis sees Exodus, along with Josh 1–12, as an imperializing text meant to justify the possession of distant lands.³⁷ Dube asserts that these texts function as a literary-rhetorical unit meant to sanction, self-validate, and authorize a program of conquest. The rhetorical elements appear in a fourfold manner: as authorizing Israelite travel, as constructing flat assessments of the land and people inhabiting it, as creating an antithetical profile of the colonizer, and to present gender as subjugation.

First, the literary methods that create this colonizing narrative are meant to authorize travel. This theme appears frequently in Moses’ repeated imperative “Let my people go!” Dube points out that this travel itinerary ultimately originates with God, the architect of this journey.³⁸ She notes how Exodus characterizes God as the ultimate hero of the story who uses Israelite slavery to win the reader’s sympathy, but does not unravel the institution of slavery in what

36 Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” 263.

37 For full discussion see Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 57–83. Dube borrows from Mary Louise Pratt whose work describes literary strategies employed by colonizers to maintain their blamelessness. See *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

38 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 61.

follows. It remains a feature of the society that is forming and yet to be formed (Exod 21:1–22; Josh 9:16–17).

Second, Exodus justifies the seizure of land by appealing to the unquestioned agency of the promise-making God. The occupied status of the coveted land is not concealed, nor is it problematic for the story of Exodus. The land belongs to Israel because God deems it so.

Third, Dube turns her attention to the construction of difference. Exodus, she asserts, articulates identity by portraying the colonized and colonizer in drastically oppositional terms. The colonizing Israelites are presented in positive ways while the dispossessed are seen through the lens of deficiency. They are little more than idol worshippers (Exod 20:2–6, 23; 23:13, 23–33; 34:11–17). Those who do not qualify as Israelites are to be destroyed in gruesome ways (Exod 15:14–15; see again 23:23–33; 34:11–17). This plays out graphically in the destruction narratives of Joshua (2:8, 24; 3:10; 5:1; 8:26–27; 11:12–20; 12:7–24). Conversely Israel is portrayed in terms of its connectedness to God through the ancestral covenant (Exod 2:24–25; 6:3–4). The God of Exodus is quick to express an unflinching commitment to Israel (Exod 4:22; 6:7; 8:23; 9:4; 11:6–7; 19:5).

Fourth, Dube briefly examines the Exodus narrative for the ways it obscures the roles of women as they transition from being co-colonized figures with men, to being colonizers who share in the identity of males, to being submerged as patriarchal objects within their own society (Exod 19:15; 20–21).

Dube interrogates the biblical text sharply, bringing to light the story's complicated rhetorical elements to demonstrate the reemergence of subjugation in Exodus and Joshua. Like Warrior, Dube spots troubling references to Canaanite annihilation present throughout the books. And, like Warrior, she reduces the complexity of Exodus's characters by poaching a select few. Nearing her conclusion, she overstates, writing, "The story of Israel's trek from Egypt to the land of Canaan is *in every way* a God, gold, and glory narrative ... *In every way*, Israel's story in Exodus-Joshua highlights the literary-rhetorical strategies of colonial subjugation of distant lands." (emphasis mine)³⁹

Dube's principal critique of Exodus is that it constructs identity rigidly between the civilized Israelites on the one hand and the barbaric Canaanites on the other. While illuminating, her assessment is incomplete. Dube's reading quickly dispatches the text without attending to the complicated issues present within it. This is especially true of the characters in Exodus's opening stories. Where Dube discusses the women of Exodus's introductory chapters, they are

39 Ibid., 69–70.

oversimplified as pioneers of independence. Her position, that the women are set up to be later concealed under the tide of Israelite patriarchy, undercuts the intricately seminal roles they play in the resistance drama itself. Dube does not envision hybridity as a critical third category for exercising postcolonial inquiry. Otherness is treated flatly, as a feature of polarized Canaanite existence.

Gale A. Yee on Exodus

The most current iteration of Exodus exegesis in postcolonial biblical criticism comes with the work of Gale A. Yee.⁴⁰ Her chapter in *Methods for Exodus* begins with a historical disclaimer. While the narratives of Exodus cannot be definitively proven as historically verifiable, she argues that more is known about the complex moment of Torah canonization in the exilic and postexilic eras. Yee moves the discussion of Exodus beyond the usual narrative-level examination. She briefly sketches a portrait of the Yehud colony and details the political climate in which the book of Exodus is composed.

Yehud, under Persian rule, was an overwhelmingly agrarian society occupied by a peasant class which descended from a subaltern people that had never been exiled. The underclass now supported the ruling upper classes. Jerusalem served as the capital for the colony and hosted the Persian-supported Judean elites which held power over the provincial population. This upper class was composed of landowners and descendants of the priestly class, which now functioned as liaisons for the imperial agents of the wider Persian empire.⁴¹ Unlike her postcolonial counterparts, Yee diagnoses the complex social situation of Persian-ruled Judea as one marked by hybridity.

Yee categorizes the ruling elite group as a hybrid people negotiating its identity which straddled the all-powerful Persian center and the shared ethnic roots of the Jewish periphery. The Persian imperial practice of allowing elites in colonies to standardize legal and narrative traditions was likely extended to the Yehud population and resulted in the production of the Torah. Such a practice was permitted if the produced text upheld the concerns of Persian rule. Yee agrees with Jon Berquist's hypothesis that the Pentateuch articulates the old Israelite traditions which formed the cultural foundations of Yehud while also

40 For full discussion see Gale A. Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," in *Methods for Exodus* (ed. Thomas B. Dozeman; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010), 193–233.

41 Ibid., 211, 230.

supporting Persia's ideological control of its colony.⁴² She concludes that the Torah is itself "a product of colonial hybridity."⁴³ Not only were its architects culturally situated on the dividing line between empire and people, but the texts they compiled and composed reveal these marks as well. For her, the text is "a bricolage of voices, viewpoints, geographies, classes, and ideologies."⁴⁴

The story of Exodus, as a hybrid text, advanced the dual interests of Persia and that of a re-settling Israel; the center and the margins. In one direction Israel took up this invitation to cement its national identity. In another, Israel was forced to sculpt its textual testimony under the watchful eye of the authorizing imperium, now self-installed as colonial pedagogue. What emerges in the book of Exodus is then a rendition that tried to assuage the colonizing power *and* the local populace. The text was canonized, argues Yee, in the midst of a taut socio-political climate to serve both the powerless and powered, resistance and empire, colonial and subversive anticolonial impulses.

Yee's investigation moves to the women of Exod 1–2. Yee asserts that the text of Exodus is meant to demonize Egypt, not only because it was still a prevailing threat in postexilic times, but also because Exodus would deflect focus from the Persian domination of the day.⁴⁵ Yee maintains that Exod 1–2 is to be read in light of these dynamics. She identifies the use of stereotypes and binaries as primary vehicles meant to create comedy and critique the rival Egyptians. Binaries include master/slave, Egyptian/Hebrew, male babies/female babies, Egyptian women/Hebrew women, Pharaoh/midwives, and especially, stupid/clever polarities. Each of these simplified appraisals served to solidify Persian identity while calming the empire's nerves about the potential threat still operative in Egypt.

According to Yee, the Pharaoh is everywhere lampooned. First, the Egyptians exacerbate their struggle with the Hebrew group by failing to learn from their unsuccessful labor policies. Second, they go on to foolishly pronounce death on newborn boys and not on the pregnant mothers who are the source of males births. Third, Egyptians are ridiculed for their absurd decision to conscript foreign midwives into the service of the empire's pogrom. Blind to the danger posed by foreign women, Pharaoh cannot see the subversive capacity of his own daughter taking shape on the horizon. Yee's postcolonial assessment of Pharaoh's daughter counts her also as a comedic foil, inadvertently placing a

42 Ibid., 213. See further Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 138–139.

43 Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 213.

44 Ibid., 215, 214.

45 Ibid., 215.

Hebrew in the Egyptian court. As “the embodiment of foolishness,” she is a contrast to the courageous Hebrew midwives.⁴⁶

Such a story read through the eyes of an authorizing Persian government would have served two purposes. First, the Persians would have identified with the Egyptians, feeling solidarity with them over the threat of subservient Hebrews potentially rising up to revolt. Secondly, argues Yee, the text of Exod 1–2 would have been a thrilling read for Persia. It would have confirmed Persian preeminence over the dangerous but defeated Egyptians who are cast as buffoons. Undone by women from within and without, Egypt is humiliated. Such a message of Egyptian denigration, argues Yee, would have energized and reinforced Persian self-identity. After all, how could a thoroughly inept Egypt, vulnerable to the resistance of women, possibly author revolution against the world’s preeminent superpower?

Yee provides the most sensitive postcolonial analysis of Exodus to date. While her discussion is limited mostly to chapters 1–2 (with commentary of Exod 19–20), she blazes a trail for further exploration. Perhaps most thought-provoking is her introduction of the Persian ideological influence as an authorizing and pedagogical entity standing watch over the textual production of the Torah.

Moreover, her reading of the text also leaves something to be desired. Yee identifies the sharp binaries inherent in the opening two chapters but places Pharaoh’s daughter on the side of empire. Yee portrays the monarch’s daughter as the antithesis of the midwives. Savvy and clever, the midwives are examples to be celebrated and emulated. Conversely, the royal daughter is a colonizing agent not unlike her father. Though not a maniacal murderer, Yee sees the daughter as an arrogant halfwit, tricked into doing the bidding of Moses’ sister. Like Dube before her, the characters of these chapters represent immutable extremes.

The discussion that follows in the second part of this book is most reminiscent of Yee’s thinking. Nonetheless, serious departures exist between what the present project seeks to accomplish and what Yee has already presented. Leaving behind the Persian authorization theory, my discussion aims to provide a more sustained and detailed postcolonial exegesis of Exodus, specifically handling 1:1–3:15. In doing so I will argue, counter to Yee, that the women of the text, including Pharaoh’s daughter (and Moses and YHWH), are best understood as hybridized figures.

46 Ibid., 222.

Conclusion

Exodus is a book that houses multiple ideologies, composite characters, and both vast and subtle disparities of power among those characters. Why these dimensions have not received more delicate attention in postcolonial biblical writing is puzzling. The Said, Warrior, Dube, and Yee analyses polarize Exodus by singling out suppressed characters (midwives and Canaanites) and denigrating those they view as malevolent figures (Pharaoh, his daughter, YHWH).

The aversion to nuance by these postcolonialist scholars suggests that the work done until now only intermittently qualifies under the postcolonial banner (see previous chapter for full discussion of postcolonial biblical criticism). While Yee's discussion comes closest to the mark, her reading paints Egypt coarsely, as little more than an object that is defanged through ridicule. As an optic that surveys the multiplicity of discursive entanglements, patterns of thought, and complex colonial interrelationships, the postcolonial biblical approach is able to more thoroughly uncover what Exodus contains.

Postcolonial biblical criticism, if carefully deployed, is well-suited to explore the interplay among Exodus's multidimensional facets. With this in mind, what might a more authentically postcolonial reading of Exodus expose? How does this text view Otherness? What do the writer/s want us to believe about outsiders and the nature of outsider status? How is this message accomplished? Perhaps most importantly, does the Exodus narrative reinscribe empire in some way? Is Exodus meant to subvert it? Or is the narrative active on both fronts? For my purposes, answers to these and other questions can be discussed by analyzing a most interesting narrative unit. To the issues of ideology and identity construction in 1:1–3:15 I now turn.

Identity under Construction: Contrasting Pharaonic Exclusivism with Hybridic Resistance (Exodus 1:1–2:10)

Introduction

In *Orientalism* Edward Said suggests that one of the antidotes to illicit and racist representations of the Other entails a commitment to showing, against the flat construal posited by those in power, the “complex dynamics of human life.”¹ Said maintains that a people’s narrative is a site of contestation that vigorously resists unitary and superficial appraisals of human experience. As the previous chapter noted, he does not examine the Exodus narrative for such complexity. Said’s omission does not, however, disqualify his observation outright. Calling attention to the intricacies of narrative is an effective strategy for combating misrepresentations that reduce the Other to an Orientalized essence. Those with power to recount events, or conversely, to silence the narratives of others, wield significant authority.²

Said’s “contrapuntal” reading strategy, discussed in chapter 1 above, is an approach by which readers account for both the existence of imperialism and resistance to imperialism in a given text. It aims to reassess great literary works with an eye toward giving voice to disenfranchised characters.³ Elsewhere, Said more clearly characterizes it as the reading style of “simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.”⁴ His distinctive contrapuntal sensibilities become instantly attractive for the teasing out of ideological data from both powerful and powerless positions in Exod 1:1–3:15.

The narrative voices of this unit, which go largely unmentioned and under-examined in postcolonial biblical criticism, are the subject of the following

1 Said, *Orientalism*, 247; cf. 240. On the power of narrative and narration, especially as evinced in the English novel, see *Culture and Imperialism*, 69–71. See further Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 13–71.

2 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

3 Said, *Orientalism*, 66.

4 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 51.

discussion. By way of postcolonial biblical criticism's multidisciplinary eclecticism, the current chapter and the two that follow make use of diachronic and synchronic methodologies,⁵ attuning them to general postcolonial theory and postcolonial biblical criticism, more specifically, as the means by which to identify ideological undercurrents. Particularly, the task at hand is to map⁶ the development of identity construction, destruction, and reconstruction in the opening narratives.

In the final analysis, Exod 1:1–3:15 is for Israel more than a story that introduces national origins, sketches the evil and foolish Egyptian empire, catalogs the rise of Moses, and reintroduces the national God to a new generation. Through the negative example of Pharaoh, the positive reclamation of nuanced existence by the midwives and women addressed in Exod 2, the tragic deterioration of Moses' own self-assessment, and YHWH's climactic self-identification with liminality, these stories form a dialectic of identity which claims that the uncertainty of dislocation and the ambiguity of hybridity should be considered strengths to be cultivated, not weaknesses to be rejected.

Hybridity,⁷ a word I intend to use with regularity in what follows, is often familiar from biological and botanical contexts of the nineteenth century. However, in colonial discourse it reemerged as a derogatory and supremacist term

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- 5 Sugirtharajah is justifiably nervous about the usual and unfortunate division of labor in biblical studies in which Third World interpreters are believed useful for drawing theological observations, while Euroamerican counterparts specialize in historical matters. R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Orientalism, Ethnonationalism and Transnationalism: Shifting Identities and Biblical Interpretation," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 423.
 - 6 As with the implications inherent in naming and defining a field such as postcolonial biblical criticism, I am equally nervous about the imperial implications inherent in the notion of "mapping." Burrus catalogs the dangers of this practice stating, "A mapping constructs a relationship between two domains ... it generates a second codomain (as mathematicians name it) out of the potentialities of an originary domain by establishing the conditions for metamorphosis." In her estimation, the grave danger is that the map "*becomes the territory*," thus recreating it into "new worlds of image, symbol or text." Virginia Burrus, "Mapping as Metamorphosis: Initial Reflections on Gender and Ancient Religious Discourses," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1. For a brief discussion of the phenomenon of the "topographical trope" in postcolonial theory, see Susan VanZanten Gallagher, "Mapping the Hybrid World: Three Postcolonial Motifs," in "Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading," ed. Laura E. Donaldson, special issue, *Semeia* 75 (1996): 233–235; cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 28.
 - 7 The lexicon of postcolonial theory adds the adjectival neologism "hybridic." I have adopted it in both the title and subsequent discussion.

meant to warn against the evils of cultural and ethnic miscegenation. Cultural theorists have reappropriated the term in the last few decades, reclaiming it from its pejorative connotations. Against the very rigidity from which it emerged, postcolonial theory uses it to critique the notion of human essentialism which has conceived of human identity as a construct bifurcated into static “us” versus “them” polarities. Hybridity is used to characterize identity as the inevitable blending of powered and powerless populations. Especially as explicated by Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is the subversive byproduct of colonial ideology. It creates a shift in power that destabilizes those in positions of authority. It is a term that aims to describe and embrace human cultural experience and selfhood under the positive descriptors of difference, ambivalence, and multiplicity.⁸

Identity as Difference: Pharaoh's Binary Ideology (Exodus 1:1–14)

1:1 So these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: 2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, 3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, 4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. 5 And so it was that those who came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy. But Joseph was in Egypt. 6 Then Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. 7 But the children of Israel were fruitful and teemed, and they multiplied and grew exceedingly countless; so that the land was filled with them.

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not acknowledge Joseph. 9 He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they continue multiplying and, when we encounter war, they also join unto those who hate us and fight against us and go up from the land.” 11 So they set taskmasters over them to humiliate them with burdens. They built storage cities for Pharaoh, Pithom and Rameses. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and burst forth, so that the Egyptians dreaded the children of Israel. 13 So the

8 For a summary of the term's historical development see Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–28; cf. David Theo Goldberg, “Heterogeneity and Hybridity: Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Heresy,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 72–86.

Egyptians were violent with the work imposed on the children of Israel, 14 and their lives were made bitter with hard service in mortar and in brick and in every kind of field service. In all the service in which they served, the Egyptians treated them violently.

Exod 1:1–14

Pharaoh's Animalizing Rhetoric

The story of Exodus begins with the joyful continuation of the Genesis narrative. The copulative *waw* of the 1:1 introductory clause (“so”) links Exodus with the joyful continuation of the Genesis promises.⁹ In the Ancestral Narratives (Gen 12–50), the reader encountered a promise-making God who vowed that the people would serve as a blessing, gain land, and become a multitude. The opening of Exodus underscores the success of at least two-thirds of the tri-fold promise. While the land has yet to be possessed, a prominent population and the vow that Israelites would serve as a blessing have come to fruition through Joseph and his descendants. What God accomplished writ large in the Genesis narrative is expressed microcosmically¹⁰ in the opening lines of Exodus. Thus, a major theme of Exod 1 is not the introduction of God’s creative potency, but an intensification of it.¹¹

The genealogy that opens the book (Exod 1:1–5) reports the positive standing of Joseph’s impressive seventy-member family that has travelled to Egypt.¹²

9 See Thomas B. Dozeman for an examination of the literary relationship between books in the MT and LXX by charting the conjunctive clauses in their opening lines. *Exodus* (ECC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 10–12. Davies identifies a lexical linking with the reappearance of מוֹרֶה and יוֹסֵף in Gen 50:26 and Exod 1:6. Gordon F. Davies, *Israel in Egypt: Reading Exodus 1–2* (JSOTSup 135; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 25. See further James S. Ackerman, “The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 114–115.

10 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 8. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 4. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1991), 25.

11 Ibid.

12 On the symbolic significance of the number see Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., “Seventy,” *DBI*, 775–776. Against the symbolic interpretation see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), 2:303. A thorough summary of discrepant textual witnesses can be found in William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 121–123.

Despite its repetition that Joseph has died (Exod 1:6; Gen 50:26), the text conveys that God's historical plan, and Joseph's execution of that plan, was overwhelmingly successful (Gen 45:7). Not only did Joseph's dramatic rise, foresight, and bureaucratic skill safeguard his whole generation, but as 1:7 indicates, "the children of Israel were fruitful and teemed, and they multiplied and grew exceedingly countless; so that the land was filled with them." As with Joseph's name (derived from יסף), so his clan has "added" numbers.¹³

Verse 7 reuses the language of Gen 6:11 which included מלא and ארץ to describe the world as being filled with violence. Here these words are again used descriptively, but to denote a new kind of filling. This time the filling is a source of joy and an expression of life.¹⁴ The missing piece outlined in Genesis, the lack of territory, has not undermined the promises of innumerability (Gen 1:28; 6:1; 9:1, 7; 13:16; 15:5; 17:2–6; 22:17–18; 26:4, 24; 28:14; 35:11; 46:3; 47:27; 50:20). A reversal has taken place within the span of seven verses. The once numbered (vv. 1–5) are now innumerable (v. 7).¹⁵ The narrative is eager to report that even the death of Joseph, his brothers, and their generation cannot frustrate the population explosion of the clan (vv. 6–7). Thus from the outset of Exodus, Egypt is a safe place where corporate survival and the promises of the Genesis narrative (children, blessing) have flourished under proper Egyptian hospitality.

The prologue's apex (v. 7), however, is more than a statement of growing numbers; it is an announcement of impending social turbulence.¹⁶ The first glimmer of dichotomizing identity politics comes, ironically enough, as the narrator reports the positive population growth of the Joseph group. Within the verse, seven expressions of increase (ותמלא, במאד מאד, ויעצמו, וירבו, וישרצו, פרו) accumulate to indicate "harmonious perfection" and divine supremacy.¹⁷

The narrator's choice of שרץ (teem, swarm, creep, move), from the impressive list of increase terms, is most provocative.¹⁸ The word is reminiscent of Gen

13 See Gen 30:24.

14 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 37–38.

15 Ibid., 34. Davies sees this element as one in a series of reversals that include proper names/verbs of increase, solitary Joseph/the people fill the land, old generation dies/fecundity of new generation.

16 Pablo R. Andiónach, *El Libro del Éxodo* (BEB, 119; Salamanca, ESP: Ediciones Sígueme, 2006), 22; cf. Abel Ndjereau, "Exodus," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. by Tokunboh Adeyemo; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 87.

17 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 9.

18 F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 1056. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:1655–1656.

1:20–21 where primordial waters “teem” with every kind of aquatic creature.¹⁹ It is used ordinarily to describe reptile or rodent quadrupeds (Gen 7:21; Lev 11:29–31, 41–43, 46; Ps 105:30), but also to denote airborne animals (Gen 8:17). In Genesis, God also uses the word to describe the reproductive duty of the ark’s animals (Gen 8:17), and similarly, to encourage human expansion, which is to be patterned after creaturely multiplication (Gen 9:7). These uses are set in the context of God’s creative capacities. The word appears in episodes marked by new beginnings in which שָׂרָץ indicates divinely mandated creaturely/human growth.

In Exod 1, the word functions in various ways. First, the appearance of שָׂרָץ is used to link Exodus with Genesis. The promise is coming to fruition. Second, שָׂרָץ suggests a third “beginning” of sorts. As in the creation and Noah stories, events to come in Exod 1 will involve another increase. In this sense, שָׂרָץ looks backward. Third, the use of שָׂרָץ looks forward to the plague narrative where it reappears to torment Egypt in the form of a frog “swarm” (8:3). Employed to capture the overwhelming nature of the infestation, the word evokes future terror. The reference in 1:7 is transitional. The word creates continuity with the proliferations it describes in Genesis and it also introduces the Israelite growth in Egypt as that which will bring horror in due time. Fourth, in the immediate context, the use of שָׂרָץ introduces zoological imagery to depict Israelite reproductive perfection as dangerous and uncontrollable. The reference may imply a form of self-denigration employed to set in relief Egyptian self-understanding as that which is founded on cultural supremacy. According to George A.F. Knight, the Israelites are viewed by the Egyptian populace as little more than creaturely vermin.²⁰

Finally, שָׂרָץ foreshadows a second animal reference, which comes in the midwives’ response to Pharaoh (v. 19). In the climax of the chapter, the midwives co-opt Egypt’s racist bestial language, reverse its meaning, and employ it to denounce Egyptian bigotry (full discussion below). The narrator’s subtle use of animalizing language in verse 7 signals the later, more acute, reference in verse 19.

Pharaoh’s Effacement of the Hyphenated

The joy of a large and prominent kin group thriving in the Egyptian incubator is tempered by the report of Joseph’s death (v. 6), but comes under more serious

19 See further Ezek 47:9.

20 George A.F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 4.

threat in verse 8. The shift from favored inhabitants to subaltern class comes abruptly, though it is not entirely unexpected (Gen 15:12–21).²¹ The rise (קום) of a new Pharaoh hints at something more than a change in ruler (מלך). Rather, a new dynasty is beginning.²² This change in power will mean danger for the Israelite clan.

The fact that the new king does not, as most translations have it, “know (ידע) Joseph,” accomplishes a few aims. Verse 8 sets up a contrast with God’s double knowledge in what follows (2:25; 3:7). The prominent knowledge theme is here introduced. In Exodus, God is much concerned with being known.²⁴ In the immediate context Exod 1:8 may be referencing Pharaoh’s failure of cognitive knowledge. As the generations have passed, so the awareness of Israelite origins and positive roles has faded from Egyptian memory; though the notion that the record of Joseph’s role is no longer reported is inconceivable. Most commentators view the phrase as an active disavowal of Joseph’s empire-saving role, or as a discrediting of Joseph-like wisdom.²⁵ For Nahum M. Sarna the lack of knowledge “is synonymous with disassociation, indifference, alienation, and estrangement; it culminates in callous disregard for another’s humanity.”²⁶

Egypt’s new ruler sees an opportunity to radically alter imperial dealings with the Israelite population. The fact that the Jacob family migrated from the southern Levant at the behest of a predecessor (Gen 45:9–20) matters little, if at all. This Pharaoh’s refusal to acknowledge Joseph indicates more than the dissolution of relationship between kin group and host populace. Neither is Pharaoh simply under-appreciating the Joseph group. Viewed from a

21 Davies sees Gen 15:12–21 as programmatic of Exod 1:8–14. These units are linked by their use of similar vocabulary (ידע, ארץ, עבד, ענה). *Israel in Egypt*, 60–61.

22 Rising connotes action that sometimes manifests as aggression. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (5 vols.; HCOT 1; Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1993), 1:234.

23 Sarna, *Exodus*, 5. Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 9. Propp warns that speculation about the new king founding a new era is heavy-handed. Most likely, the new king stands in contrast with the old. *Exodus* 1–18, 130. Cook suggests that the phrase means the new king usurps the throne. It is not inherited. F.C. Cook, ed., *The Bible Commentary: Exodus-Ruth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1953), 7. Cassuto suggests that whatever the identity of this Pharaoh, the text is a poetic saga uninterested in relaying historical detail. *A Commentary*, 9. Similarly, H.L. Ellison, *Exodus* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 5.

24 Pharaoh is to know (5:1–2; 7:17; 8:10; 9:14, 29), Moses is to know (8:22), Israel is to know (6:7; 10:2; 11:7; 16:6, 12; 29:46), the Egyptians are to know (7:5; 14:4, 18), and even Jethro reports coming to knowledge (18:11).

25 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (WBCom; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 17.

26 Sarna, *Exodus*, 5; cf. Ackerman, “The Moses Birth Story,” 79.

postcolonial perspective, the Pharaoh's disassociation from "Joseph" undercuts an important intra-colonial category within Egyptian society itself.

We recall that Joseph, though captive in Egypt, was a Hebrew-Egyptian occupying the realities of both empire and underclass to life-saving ends (Gen 39:14, 17; 41:12). Francisco García-Treto, reading from a Cuban-American perspective, identifies these dual dimensions and charts Joseph's transformation into a "hyphenated" person.²⁷ On the one hand, Joseph learns to shave, dress, speak, and eat like an Egyptian; he even marries into a prominent Egyptian family.²⁸ So thorough is his external assimilation that his brothers fail to recognize him (Gen 42:8). Joseph's adoption of Egyptian cultural norms allows him to operate fluidly within the foreign setting. On the other hand, these features in no way subvert his Hebrew identity. Never does Joseph fully assimilate in a manner that betrays his bicultural qualities. As García-Treto affirms, the fact that Joseph is disconnected *from* status, in contrast to establishment interpreters of the Egyptian high court, is precisely what allows him to freely decipher Pharaoh's dreams. Those on the margins can see what the center often cannot. Thus Joseph is able to aid in the survival of all.²⁹ Joseph's transformation into a hyphenated character is best seen when he explains his seeming misfortune. For Joseph, what has befallen him is in fact a divine plan to save "life" (Gen 45:5); by which he means *both* Hebrew and Egyptian existence.

The knowledge phrase (1:8) is not simply the tragic footnote of an overlooked or rejected people. Neither is this a case of simply failing to appreciate the contribution of foreign persons. Verse 8 represents Pharaoh's first act of aggression. Here Pharaoh makes Israelites into the despised Other. The net effect of verse 8 is that the Joseph group is socially delegitimized. It is a statement about Egypt's commitment to binaries and the erasing of blended identities. To borrow Doris Sommer's perceptive critique of American civic and cultural milieu offers appropriate language with which to label Pharaoh's act as one that "demonizes the doubleness."³⁰

27 "Hyphenating Joseph: A View of Genesis 39–41 from the Cuban Diaspora," in *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 134–145; cf. his "Joseph in Exile: A Personal Testimony," in *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 144–148.

28 García-Treto, "Hyphenating Joseph," 142.

29 *Ibid.*, 142–143.

30 Doris Sommer, "A Vindication of Double Consciousness," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 175.

Pharaoh's unwillingness to acknowledge the value of the Joseph clan is not entirely without precedent. Conditions in Egypt have been less than utopian. There have been hints of discriminatory Egyptian practices already. Notably, in Gen 43:32, Egyptian dietary laws exclude even the authoritative Joseph from eating with Egyptian subordinates. Also, in 46:34, Joseph instructs his relatives that shepherds occupy a low social position among Egyptians. Notwithstanding these references to social norms and class stratification, the turn of Exod 1:8 points to a more radical shift in state policy.

Consequently, the Pharaoh's actions to disassociate from Joseph's descendants, along with the rigid construction of identity to take place in the remainder of Exod 1, convey a program of state-sponsored rejection. The empire is dissolving its partnership with foreign and hybridized figures (more on the concept of hybrid identity below). A people's experience of displacement and dislocation, not only on geographical terrain but also within the self, is a major feature of postcolonial existence and literatures.³¹ The corporal violence that is inflicted upon the colonized is regularly accompanied by psychological violence as well.

Pharaoh's determination to sever ties gives way to fear and the promulgation of violence against a people that has been and continues to be a valuable part of the Egyptian nation. Now made an anonymous mass through relational disconnection, the Israelites find themselves in harm's way. Without the nuance and partnership offered by hybridized figures like Joseph, polarization and dehumanization follow close behind. The empire slips casually into a master-servant dichotomy.

Pharaoh's Use of Hyperbole and Exclusivist Pronouns

To make his case, Pharaoh begins to exaggerate Israelite capabilities (v. 9). It is hardly conceivable that a people could be "more and mightier" than the Egyptians.³² Martin Noth looks ahead to the conscription of just two midwives as evidence that the population could not have been excessively numerous,³³ though their exact numbers hardly matter. Prompted by his own fear, Pharaoh is searching for a justification to oppress. He overstates the threat by hearkening

31 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 8–9.

32 Propp notices the connection between Pharaoh's fear and Genesis (see 1:28; 9:1–2). *Exodus* 1–18, 135.

33 Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 23. Similarly, J.P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971), 60. Others read the midwives as representative of a larger midwife organization. See discussion below.

back to what the narrator reported in verse 7. The NRSV's "grew exceedingly strong" hints at military prowess.³⁴ But the clause in question, *ויעצמו במאד מאד* can be alternatively glossed "they were exceedingly countless."³⁵ The line that follows *ותמלא הארץ אתם* ("so that the land was filled with them") indicates that the issue at hand is Israelite numbers, not their overt military capabilities.

Moreover, the land in question (v. 7) is likely Goshen (Gen 45:10; 46:28, 34; 47:1, 4, 6, 27; 50:8; Exod 8:22; 9:26), not the wider Egypt.³⁶ These nuances matter not to Pharaoh. In verse 9 Pharaoh conflates numbers with military potential to incite fear that the client population will overrun its predetermined borders, join enemies, and ultimately escape (v. 10). Pharaoh fabricates threat because there exists no legal fault to rest at Israelite feet. As Benno Jacob recalls, the Israelites are guilty of no crimes. "Their existence was begrudged them."³⁷

Now alarmed at their potential for sudden and aggressive mobilization, utterly hypothetical as it is, Pharaoh addresses his people. Pharaoh's plea bears the marks of a skilled tactician wishing to demarcate Israelites, not as fellow insiders, but as dangerous foreigners ready to pounce. In Pharaoh's thinking, Israelite residency has not created assimilated loyalists but would-be rebels and potential escapees. Pharaoh invites Egyptians to "behold" (*הנה*), appealing to their personal experience (v. 9). He then concocts instability by hyperbolizing Israelite numbers and power to prey on Egyptian fears. To accomplish his aims, Pharaoh qualifies the narrator's familial *בני ישראל* (vv. 1, 7) by inserting *עם* ("people") (v. 9). Thus he subtly refashions the Israelite clan into a larger, more amorphous, population. The move is the first in a string of depersonalizations to follow (vv. 10–11).

According to Everett Fox, the insertion of *עם* is a balancing tactic meant to match the prominence of the Israelite people with that of the Egyptians. The phrase draws a literary battle line between the two entities that *both* qualify as nations.³⁸ Pharaoh's message is simple and incisive: the enemy Other is neither

34 Similarly, see ASV and NET.

35 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:868.

36 Propp thinks otherwise. Following the promises of innumerability in Gen 1:28 and 9:1, the land is the world. Here too then, it is anticlimactic to suggest that the Israelites are merely filling in the land that pertains to them. *Exodus 1–18*, 130; cf. Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (UBSHS; New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 17.

37 Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (trans. Walter Jacob; Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1992), 11. The same point is made by D.E. Zelig, *Moses: A Psychodynamic Study* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), 42. See further Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 15.

38 Everett Fox, *Now These Are the Names: A New English Rendition of the Book of Exodus* (New

weak nor lurking on the exterior; the enemy Other is strong and among the Egyptians already.

Pharaoh continues creating the villainous Other by also manipulating at the level of the pronouns, which he uses to generate differentiation. For Pharaoh, there are insiders and outsiders, those who belong and those that do not. Those that are “his” (v. 9) are members of the ruling metropole. The vulnerable Israelite Other belongs to the margins. Pharaoh continues his differentiating tactics by using the first-person plural “we” to instill trust and solidarity with his people.³⁹ In so doing Pharaoh stresses that even *he* is a potential victim of Hebrew mobilization. The pronouns of verse 10 generalize Israelite identity. Here again Pharaoh’s rhetorical ploy aims to depersonalize. The Joseph group are no longer the “children of Israel” (v. 9). In addition, the placement of the pronouns perform a similar function by forming an *inclusio* around the Israelite “them.” The pronouns mimetically encircle the overmatched Israelites. For it is with the Egyptian “us” (וְנִלְחֶם-בָּנוּ and נִתְחַכְמֶהָ) that Pharaoh begins and ends his speech. Pharaoh persists in his oppositional construction of difference. Those that count as people are Egyptians. Non-Egyptians are mere encumbrances to be first exploited, then exterminated.

As postcolonial theory teaches—principally through Said⁴⁰—the creation of a national identity is tied to its need for an Other. Knowledge of the Other is not for the benefit of authentic understanding. Neither are nations concerned to genuinely know foreign individuals and communities.⁴¹ Rather, the constructed Other is vital for the construction of the Self. It is the Self that creates the Other through a vast network of antithetical projections and misrepresentations. The dominant Self comes into focus as the authenticity of objectified groups and individuals is blurred, obscured, and so corrupted.⁴²

York: Schocken, 1986), 11. See further Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969), 20. Fishbane sees the word as setting the stage for what follows: a story of *national* liberation. Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 63.

39 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 48–49.

40 In *Orientalism* Said articulates the intellectual history of representation between the Western and Arab worlds. He identifies the relationship of Occident and Orient as one marked by vast asymmetry and disparity in an imbalanced, internalized, and closed system (or discourse). This discourse is meant to capture and filter knowledge of the Orient for the sake of the Western consciousness.

41 Ibid., xv–xxx; 5–6; 12; 21; 60; 203; 273; 322.

42 Ibid., 3. According to Spivak, representation without essentialism is impossible, for “in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the

Said inventories the arsenal of popular *mis*representations. At its worst, the Orient's inhabitants are disfigured and demonized as a fanatical, bloodthirsty, belligerent hoard. Raucous and dangerous, the East is a place for villains, wide-eyed radicals and terrorists. So also, the East is stylized as a place of deviant sexual surplus and unlimited escape for the Western traveler. The Orient is coded as simultaneously demure and sensual, ravenous, and lecherous.⁴³ At best, the collective Orient is a mysterious, dark place of primitive and pastoral people with equally archaic customs. The Orient is a place that maintains a basic ahistorical immutability. This is a community steeped in primal tradition and allergic to any sort of change or societal advancement. Moreover, the Orient is a place of oddness and eccentricity, "a living tableau of queer-ness."⁴⁴

Again, Said has shown that Orientalist discourse does not forthrightly enumerate the venerable elements of Western society set against those of the East in a contrast/compare dialogic. Instead the East is always the West's sinister doppelganger. As a mechanism for drawing distinctions, Orientalism defines the East as the incompatible corruption of Western virtues. The East is always the West's villainous simulacrum. If the East is sensationalized as barbaric, exotic, a place of corporeal sexual pleasure, feminine, a land for adventures, innately evil, and devoid of reason, then the West is benchmarked as civil, normative, sexually circumspect, masculine, safe, inherently good, and supremely logical. Difference is used disparagingly to code identity. Césaire's incisive equation, "colonization = 'thingification'" captures this element of colonial power's sordid agenda.⁴⁵

Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Said have taught that colonial objectification of this kind has more menacing implications—it is a first step to fabricating moral freedom. The colonizer's guilt can be assuaged if the abused are projected as subhuman.⁴⁶ Once the person or group is made into an object through reinvention and negation, mistreatment becomes psychologically ten-

portrait sense." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (ed. Sarah Harasym; New York: Routledge, 1990), 108. See further Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. Charles Lam Markmann; New York: Grove Press, 1967), 173–176, 189.

43 Said, *Orientalism*, 187; 207–208.

44 Ibid., 103.

45 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (trans. Joan Pinkham; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 42.

46 Ibid., 53. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 86. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; so also Said, *Orientalism*, 83–84; 102; 204.

able. Bhabha would agree: if the Israelites are less than persons and essentialized into the “imagined communities” of national discourses,⁴⁷ then their extermination presents no ethical crisis. Those in power can abuse and annihilate without remorse. For according to Bhabha, “Oppressors typically justify their own inhumanity by explicitly or implicitly impugning their victims’ humanity.”⁴⁸

Pharaoh’s Counterfeit Collectivity

In verses 10–11 Pharaoh continues to construct identity as oppositional. The Israelites are set to bolster Egyptian infrastructural strength by the forced construction of storage cities. To win support for his plan, in verse 10, Pharaoh addresses his subjects with the imperative “Come!” (הבה), the cohortative “let us ...” (נתחכמה) and the use of “lest” (פן) (v. 10). All three elements resemble the Babel story (Gen 11:4), where the only identical usage of this phrase is found in the First Testament. Additionally, the appearance of the imperative הבה that begins Pharaoh’s exhortation intimates misconduct; for this form of the imperative appears only in contexts where the abuse of power is at issue.⁴⁹ The reference to bricks (לבנים) in both Gen 11:3 and Exod 1:14 suggests yet another allusive connection between Babel and Exod 1.

These linkages are a clue to the disastrous fate of Pharaoh’s plan and to the inevitability of a second imminent spreading in the exodus event.⁵⁰ The echoes of Gen 11 also heighten the oppositional stance already forming in the Exodus narrative. As the Babel group’s fear of being scattered is quelled by their building project (Gen 11:2–4), so too the Pharaoh of Exod 1 attempts to diminish a similar brand of fear with a building project of his own. In both instances, the act of building emanates from an “us versus them” mentality.⁵¹

The lexical similarities do more than replay the Babel tale in a new setting. Exodus’s appropriation of Gen 11:1–9 begins to take on new dimensions when examined more closely. What is key is the reverberation of the identity issue. The Babel group attempts to galvanize identity through the building of a city and tower. Nervous about the usual scattering that results from

47 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 300.

48 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 140.

49 Davies notes that the form deviates from the normative “Give!” to “Come now!” in only four of its 31 total appearances. Of the four, three can be found in the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:3, 4, 7). The final instance comes in the Tamar and Judah tale (Gen 38:16). Pharaoh is being compared to previous wrongdoers. *Israel in Egypt*, 58.

50 Ackerman, “The Moses Birth Story,” 81.

51 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 18.

aggressive confrontation with other groups, the Babel generation builds fortifications in order to cement a name. At issue is not simply a program for civil unity that results from impressive corporate accomplishments, but an unwillingness to carry on with God's command to "fill the earth" (Gen 1:22, 28; 9:1).

Babel is the outworking of a society in search of insulation, both from the divine plan and from societal heterogeneity as a natural outcome. The Babel group is committed to control; control over their destiny and control over their identity.⁵² The narrowly isolationist Babel community seeks only self-preservation and in doing so puts all of creation in jeopardy.⁵³ God's punishment (scattering) indicates the real nature of the transgression. As Brueggemann summarizes, "The narrative then is a protest against every effort at oneness derived from human self-sufficiency and autonomy."⁵⁴ It is only God who is endowed with the prerogative and power to create a name for humankind.⁵⁵ The Genesis text, therefore, is an example of both external and internal construction programs. The first builds a city and tower. The second builds an identity for the purposes of self-conservation and the exclusion of outsiders.

Israel's building project might at first be seen as little more than the tangential outcome of the real issues: Egyptian malice, fear, and oppression. But if Pithom and Rameses are replays of Babel, which is about outward and inward fabrication to the exclusion of others, then the construction programs of Exod 1 may follow suit. Perhaps the building of storage cities represents not only the empire's attempt to abuse a powerless people and exploit their labor. Perhaps we are to read Pithom and Rameses as Pharaoh's effort to *recreate* Israelite identity under the auspices of Egyptian cultural norms. Pharaoh seeks to create unity. But like the Babel group's "self-serving unity,"⁵⁶ so Pharaoh is constructing counterfeit unity. For the valid Self is the Egyptian Self.

To reorder Israelite national identity, Pharaoh will need the help of his trusted insiders. He turns to those that are his in order to begin the task of repression that he hopes will turn into transformation. The "they" addressed

52 Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 109.

53 Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:412.

54 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 100.

55 See Gen 12:2; 2 Sam 7:9. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 245.

56 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 99.

in verse 11 are likely a group of Egyptian officials rather than the Egyptian populace since Pharaoh's audience has the power to establish taskmasters in what ensues.⁵⁷

Pharaoh dissolves distinctiveness and depersonalizes Israelite males by pooling them into corvée work gangs.⁵⁸ Bhabha is critical of such phenomena in contemporary settings. He worries that nationhood mantras like "Out of many one" are "spatial expressions of a unitary people."⁵⁹ For Bhabha, these tactics fail to communicate much-needed heterogeneity. As Memmi has said, the colonized are "entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ('They are this.' 'They are all the same')."⁶⁰

The storage cities symbolize Egyptian state prowess over the economic means of production and surplus.⁶¹ This is indeed a story of vast power disparity between two unequal entities. Tragically, says Brueggemann, "The slaves must enhance precisely the power they most fear, resent, and hate."⁶² The echo of Joseph is, again, not far off. As in his story, so now the Israelite people are again tasked with safeguarding Egyptian survival (Gen 41:33–36). But unlike the Joseph tale, this narrative features Israelites doing more than managing the machinery of surplus; they are embodying it.

Yet more irony exists in the act of building itself. The Israelites, who are considered enemies, are constructing cities that will ensure infrastructural robustness for a growing population, which they themselves have helped create. No doubt aware of this irony, Pharaoh will take what is meant for preservation and attempt to alter it for the purposes of abuse. Pharaoh will take life and attempt to transform it into death. The midwives and the Nile serve as the means of his future efforts.

Pharaoh's Successful Racialization of Egypt

The narrator's sense of delicious irony is perhaps clearest in verse 12, where we learn that the plot to crush the spirit of working men has not assuaged their conjugal desires. Subverting the long-standing tradition of Egyptian wis-

57 Against this see Jacob, *The Second Book*, 10. However, if Jacob is right, then the note about Pharaoh's command to involve "all his people" in v. 22 is anticlimactic.

58 Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 21.

59 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 204.

60 Memmi, *The Colonizer*, 85.

61 Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:695.

62 Ibid.

dom ("let us deal shrewdly," v. 10),⁶³ Egypt's plan fails. The Israelites continue to multiply and spread. This time however, the multiplication is not simply a matter-of-fact reality (v. 7). The Israelite numbers "burst forth"⁶⁴ in direct relationship with the vigor of their labor (v. 12). The פָּן ("lest") of Pharaoh's fear (v. 10) is met and exceeded by the punning phraseology of the two-fold כֵּן ("thus, so") of verse 12.⁶⁵

As Pharaoh once rose to power, so the Israelites are now also on the rise. Davies notes how four spatial verbs work against each other to denote the struggle in the narrative. Pharaoh, who has risen to power (עַל-מִצְרַיִם ... וַיָּקָם) is nervous about Israel's going up from the land (וַעֲלֶה מִן-הָאָרֶץ) and therefore attempts to set down taskmasters upon the Israelites (וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ עֲלֵיו).⁶⁶ Even the conclusion of the chapter includes Pharaoh's decree to throw male newborns, thus connoting a downward movement (v. 22).⁶⁷ But try as he might, the Israelite people refuse to be brought low.

The Egyptian response to Israelite risings in verse 12 is telling. Mainline translations convey קוֹן as the reaction of an awed and unnerved population.⁶⁸ Glosses include "dread" (NRSV, NIV, NKJV), "grieved" (ASV, KJV), "disgust and dread" (CEB), "hated" (CEV), and "loathed" (NET). Thomas B. Dozeman explains that the former (dread) fits the context best, given that it carries the connotation of fear in light of possible war. He cites similar uses in Isa 7:16 and Num 22:2–3.⁶⁹ But F.V. Greifenhagen points out that in a majority of cases throughout the First Testament, קוֹן describes feelings of revulsion between ethnic populations (Gen 27:46; Lev 20:23; Num 22:3; 1 Kgs 11:25).⁷⁰

63 Lester Meyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 30. Benno Jacob notices a drastic reversal. The Pharaoh of Gen 41:39 praises the wisdom of Joseph, while the Pharaoh of Exod 1:10 sees wisdom in the destruction of the Joseph group. *The Second Book*, 11.

64 This word (יִפְרֹץ) carries not only birthing connotations, but also the notion of breaking or bursting forth in violence. See Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 829.

65 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 11.

66 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 46–47.

67 Ackerman makes note of the descent motif in the tragic turns of Joseph's story. These descents are followed by his subsequent risings and are prototypical of Israel's existence in Egypt. "The Moses Birth Story," 116–119.

68 J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "The Book of Exodus (exegesis)," in *The Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; New York: Abingdon, 1952), 1:855.

69 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 72.

70 F.V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel's Identity* (JSOTSup 361; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 54.

If Greifenhagen is right about the ethnic/cultural implications of the word, then his conclusions further bolster the argument being made here. Pharaoh's aim is to construct personhood under exclusivist categories. Not only is Pharaoh successful in racializing the Israelite threat, but he also imparts that bigotry to his people. As is the case with Pharaoh, their feeling of dread/loathing/grief/disgust finds its source in racial distinction and superiority. The hatred of the singular Pharaoh is replicated in the hatred of the multiple Egyptians.

In verse 14, the construction project gives way to more demoralizing service in the form of mortar and brick. The added note about "every kind of field service" connotes farming⁷¹ but may also include the digging of irrigation canals.⁷² As in verse 13, the constant feature of this new and totalizing cruelty is its severity and violence (פרך). And like the string of increase-words in verse 7, the derivatives of terms indicating labor and ruthlessness in verses 13 and 14 total seven (ועבדו, בעבדה, עבדה, עבדתם, עבדו, בפרך, twice). As Cassuto notes, their monotonous succession pairs with the content to evoke the pounding of hammer blows.⁷³

This numerical mirroring closes the multiplication sequence. What began with perfect fertility (v. 7) now closes with "perfect" mistreatment (v. 13–14). The balancing accomplishes a stalemate in the narrative. The reader must ponder whose will, that of the Israelites or that of Pharaoh, will win out in the end. Until this question is answered, the current subsection is at an end. Something new is about to begin.

Identity as Commodity: Pharaoh's Assimilationist and Ethnocentric Tactics (Exodus 1:15–16)

1:15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 "When you assist as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a boy, then kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

Exod 1:15–16

Pharaoh's maneuvering culminates in verses 15–16 where again he responds not with dialogue, camaraderie, or humanity. He momentarily suspends his large-

71 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 134.

72 Cook, *Exodus-Ruth*, 8. See further John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Exodus, Leviticus* (trans. Philip Schaff; LCHS; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1876), 3.

73 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 12.

scale tactics to test the limits of Israelite identity on an interpersonal level. The narrative comes to rest on an odd discussion between the Egyptian monarch and a pair⁷⁴ of Hebrew midwives,⁷⁵ Shiphrah (“fairness, beauty”) and Puah (“girl, splendor”).

74 Various commentators suggest that the two midwives are synecdochic of larger guilds of midwives. See C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (BCOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:424. Kaiser, “Exodus,” 306. Lange, *Exodus, Leviticus*, 3. John N. Oswalt, “Exodus (commentary),” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus* (Carol Streams, Ill.: Tyndale, 2008), 286; James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979), 22; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (TBST; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 29; others read the story as a folk-tale and so the logistical impossibility of performing so many births with only a pair of women is a non-issue; Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 5; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 17; similarly, Durham sees the number as irrelevant; for him, “What is the point is the midwives’ faith and its effects for Israel and for the midwives themselves.” John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 13.

75 The ethnicity of the midwives remains a point of contention among commentators. The genitive phrase (למילדת העברית) is adjectival or objective. If the former, the translation is “Hebrew midwives.” If the latter is adopted, the translation yields “midwives of/to the Hebrews.” The second option follows LXX, the Vulgate, and Josephus (*Ant.* 2.206). It may be read to suggest that Shiphrah and Puah are non-Hebrews. While he maintains the midwives’ Hebrew origins, Kaiser notices that Pharaoh’s inclusion of all his people (against a pair of midwives) in v. 22 may be used to support their Egyptian identity. “Exodus,” 307. So also Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:252. Rylaarsdam considers them Egyptians, thus interpreting the episode as an appeal to God’s universal revelation to all creation. “The Book of Exodus (exegesis),” 856. Likewise, Greenberg sees the actions of the Egyptian midwives as evincing a “moral alertness not made to depend on knowledge of Israel’s God and his Torah.” *Understanding Exodus*, 31. If these are indeed Egyptian renegades, it may explain why Pharaoh does not question them further; cf. Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 32. Fox argues that using “Hebrew” as they do in their retort to Pharaoh signals their Egyptian lineage because the term is usually used by foreigners to identify Israelites. *Now These Are the Names*, 13. On the other hand, Shiphrah and Puah are Semitic names. On the onomasticon of the names see W.F. Albright, “Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves From the Eighteenth Century,” *JAOS* 74 (1954): 222–233. See further Edwin C. Hostetter, “Shiphrah,” *ABD* 5:1221. Jacob believes it is unlikely that the names were Hebraized, reasoning that if the text wishes to commend Egyptians, changing their names is unlikely. *The Second Book*, 18. In light of the note that they fear God and the aggressive nature of their response to Pharaoh, the former translation seems the more likely option. On the possibility that their ethnicity is left intentionally open, see Jopie Siebert-Hommers, *Let the Daughters Live! The Literary Architecture of Exodus 1–2 as a Key for Interpretation* (BIS 37; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 46; cf. Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 58.

The use of the “Hebrew” descriptor is here introduced in Exodus. The term’s origin and meaning is a source of discussion.⁷⁶ While it is used almost exclusively in the First Testament to designate members of the Israelite people, the term may be derived from the wider category of *ḥabiru/ḥapiru* populations of extra-biblical sources dating from the second millennium BCE.⁷⁷ These indicate not ethnicity, but a diverse sociological group designated variously as a social class comprised of non-citizens, stateless caravaneers, itinerant merchants, those that are landless, slaves, or non-native immigrants. More aggressive connotations like those of mercenaries, fugitives, insurgents, bandits, raiders or outlaws living on the social fringes, are also attested. These *ḥabiru/ḥapiru* that feature in the social upheaval of the Late Bronze Age are a class of people lacking social standing and often categorized as most vulnerable.

The fact that “Hebrew/s” appears seven times in Exod 1–2 leads Jorge Pixley to opt for the latter nuances (raiders, outlaws), thus accentuating the resistance theme of the chapters.⁷⁸ Dozeman recognizes the difficulty with drawing a direct line between “Hebrew” and “Ḥapiru” people of Akkadian lore, but nevertheless sees the term as a word denoting some brand of social alienation, and so, as shorthand for Otherness. This much is evident in the word’s use as a derogatory term spoken condescendingly by non-Israelites (Gen 39:14, 17; 1 Sam 4:6, 9; 14:11, 21).⁷⁹

If Pixley and Dozeman are right about the disparaging nature of “Hebrew,” then its appearance in verse 15 is more than an innocuous descriptor for the midwives’ clan. Given the imminent context of resistance, it must be under-

76 The term may be derivative of עבר (pass over, cross over), or linguistically connected to Abraham’s ancestor Eber (Gen 10:21, 24–25; 11:14–17; 1 Chr 1:8–19, 25; Luke 3:35), or related to the more sociopolitical term from the Akkadian *ḥabiru/ḥapiru*. The undertones of עברי are regularly depreciative. The term appears when Israel interacts with non-Israelites, or when the reference is to an Israelite slave. So also, the term is employed pejoratively of Israelite protagonists and groups. With time, it came to be used as a generalized ethnic designation. See Niels Peter Lemche, “Hebrew,” *ABD* 3:95.

77 Ibid. See further his “Ḥabiru, Ḥapiru,” *ABD* 3:6–10.

78 Jorge V. Pixley, “Exodus,” in *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 19; cf. Jorge V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 5.

79 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 76. See also 1 Sam 13:9; 29:3. Carol Meyers also sees the term as denoting underclass status, rather than ethnic designation. *Exodus* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 36–37. Against these views, see Greenberg, who concedes that the term is used by non-Israelites to speak of Israelites, but understands the term as gentile, attesting to Israelite ethnicity, not as designating class distinctions of a wider group. *Understanding Exodus*, 27–29. See again Lemche, “Hebrew,” 3:95.

stood as a statement with profound sociological implications. The term is a clue to the midwives' underclass status, as well as to their rebellious potential. Against Pharaoh's insistence that this is a dangerous "people" group (v. 9), the narrator's use of the epithet reminds us that the labor population is far less organized. Ironically, the ordered empire will be no match for the disordered Hebrews.⁸⁰

The word's appearance in the introduction of the midwives' episode, especially when paired with the political designation of Pharaoh as "the king of Egypt" (v. 15; see further vv. 17–18), also underscores the distance between the formidable monarch and the seemingly feeble midwives. Pharaoh's insulting use of "Hebrew" in verse 15 means to intimidate, differentiate, and denigrate the midwives. They are hopelessly overmatched; or so it seems.

The convention of naming the midwives but withholding more than titles for the monarchs also bolsters the crisp division between the power of Egypt/Pharaoh on the one hand and Israel/midwives on the other.⁸¹ Taken as a whole, the chapter ebbs and flows between specified naming (Israelite family, 1:1–5), to generic title for the Egyptian monarch (1:8, 11, 15), to a second specified naming of the midwives (1:15), and back to unspecified terms for the monarch (1:17, 18). The movement mimes the struggle between the humanized forces for life and the generic, titled, but morally bankrupt forces for death.⁸²

The opening names of the Israelite family add humanity and personality to the client population. The same is true of Shiphrah and Puah. Or better still, the omissions indicate that only Shiphrah and Puah are performing humanely and have therefore earned the right to be named. The intimacy of naming is not reciprocated in the presentation of the nameless pharaohs. Their names are withheld; they will not be allowed to enter the record.⁸³

80 Brueggemann, "Exodus," 696.

81 The use of the title "Pharaoh" may point to the ahistorical nature of the narrative. W.G. Dever, "Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?" in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (ed. E.S. Frerichs and L.H. Lesko; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 67–86. Yurco believes the absence of the names reflects the usual omission of Pharaoh's name in administrative literature. F.J. Yurco, "Merneptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origins," in Frerichs and Lesko, *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, 27–55.

82 For a literary analysis of life and death as contrasting themes in chapters 1–2 see Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 99–134. Comparably, Davies charts the narrative unity of chapter 1 by showing that proliferation (vv. 7, 12, 20) is met with rising tension and threat (vv. 8, 13–14, 22). *Israel in Egypt*, 70.

83 On the narrator's powerful role in Exod 1 see Renita J. Weems, "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in

The narrator perhaps wishes to demean Pharaoh by leaving him anonymous.⁸⁴ One might also infer that the effect of the generic designation is to heighten his divine status in advance of the coming showdown with YHWH.⁸⁵ Or perhaps the refusal to name allows for a paradigmatic presentation of Pharaoh, and so remains open to all people facing abusers.⁸⁶ Too many details would unravel the text's timelessness. Whatever the reason for the omission, the result is clear. Pharaoh and his people are reduced to generic, faceless entities.

The empire proceeds casually from fear, to suppression, and now to killing. Pharaoh's words report the tragic news: Hebrew girls will live while Hebrew boys will die. The executions themselves are to happen covertly, presumably without the knowledge of mothers or family relatives,⁸⁷ though the reader is not told how the children are to be executed. The instructions are clear, simple, and deadly, albeit somewhat illogical.⁸⁸

The plan for population control, seemingly, makes little sense for three reasons. First, it makes no provision to deal with the male labor force, which is the source of Pharaoh's looming fear. This group remains in place. Second, killing boys ultimately erodes the laboring client population, which Pharaoh is keen to continue exploiting. In the long run, his policy is self-defeating. Third, Pharaoh's logic seems nearsighted in that Hebrew girls grow up to be Hebrew women and potential mothers. Since no mention is made of annihilating the existing Hebrew workforce that is already of age, logic dictates that the Hebrew girls will ultimately find older suitors and so replicate Pharaoh's problem in the space of one generation.

Pharaoh, as Gale Yee surmises, has been an unintelligent simpleton all along. The plans of oppression have miscarried. In an attempt to stem the tide of

Exodus 1," in "Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts," eds. David Jobling and Tina Pippin, special issue, *Semeia* 59 (1993): 26–27.

84 Meyers, *Exodus*, 34.

85 Godfrey Ashby, *Go Out and Meet God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (ITC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 9. For an analysis of militaristic imagery of holy war in Exodus see Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

86 Brueggemann, "Exodus," 695. See further Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life*, 13.

87 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 12.

88 Historical-critical explanations commonly explain the puzzling nature of Pharaoh's plan by citing the conflation of J (1:8–12, 22) and E (1:15–21) literary strata, though as Blenkinsopp notes, lexical evidence does not clearly demarcate the sources. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 145–146.

Israelite growth, he entreats powerless midwives to act for him where he has failed.⁸⁹ So wrongheaded is the plan that he erroneously calls for the killing of men, not women (those who birth populations) and children, not adults.⁹⁰ Unable to see beyond the imminent threat, Pharaoh loses touch with the wisdom of his Egyptian upbringing.

Attractive as Yee's criticisms of Pharaoh are, they do not attend to the conflicted nature of his situation. This postcolonial perspective being advanced here views Pharaoh's draconian plan as something more than the strategy of an imbecilic dolt. Nonsensical as it appears, the plan may be best understood as the conflicted, but logical, outworking of warring desires. Other than the supernatural multiplication of Israelites, there is nothing about Pharaoh's initial strategies to suggest they were ill-conceived. The current plan for infanticide is born of Pharaoh's genuine anxiety about Israelite numbers on the one hand, but also evocative of the value he places on the work of Israelite males on the other. He is unwilling to destroy the totality of economic benefits from which he and his empire profit. Therefore, his plan is perhaps best understood as assimilative.

This tactic should not surprise the reader. We have already seen an attempt at a soft assimilation in the Babel-inspired building program (vv. 10–11). Pharaoh's attempt to reframe Israelite identity by means of building projects has not had the intended effect. Rather than being diffused throughout Egyptian society, Israelites continue to multiply. The current scenario obeys a similarly assimilationist logic. Pharaoh may envision a scenario by which Israelite females will be absorbed into the wider Egyptian populace.⁹¹ Once the remaining male population is deceased, so he may think, the Hebrew women will couple with other lower-class groups and so continue producing the labor force that he requires for his building projects.⁹² Or perhaps Egyptian men will take Hebrew wives, in which case children born to Egyptian-Hebrew couples would be folded into Egyptian social networks, not those of the lower class Hebrews.⁹³ By assim-

89 Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 217.

90 Ibid. Similarly, Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 29.

91 Ashby, *Exodus*, 12.

92 Oswalt, "Exodus," 289.

93 Athena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity: An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (BIS 86; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 192. Likewise, Gendi argues on the basis of the patrilineal norm. With no living Israelite men, only the Egyptian option is open to Hebrew women. Magdi S. Gendi, "Pharaoh as a Character in Exodus 1–2: An Egyptian Perspective," in *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (Texts @ Contexts; ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 63.

ilating Hebrew mothers, Pharaoh dilutes Hebrew identity and undermines Israelites' shared sense of unity while simultaneously appropriating their fertility to serve the needs of empire. To be sure, Pharaoh is conflicted. But it is his greed, not his foolishness, that is operative.

Additionally, a postcolonial examination of Pharaoh's plot reveals a more deeply-entrenched commitment to an assimilationist program at the level of identity manipulation. Might Pharaoh's plan have more to do with gauging the extent of imperial power? Can it be that Pharaoh's purpose is to re-order the midwives' self-understanding? Logistically untenable as it appears, might his plan serve as a test to uncover the limits of Egyptian domination? Is Pharaoh performing a psycho-social experiment?

If so, Pharaoh is brazenly authoring an unparalleled brand of psychological violence anticipating what Frantz Fanon catalogues in *Black Skin White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the former, Fanon describes how the inferiority complex in the black community of his day suffers an "existential deviation," which results from the experience of living in the shadow of the majority culture, and in conflict with one's own self. In *Wretched*, Fanon outlines the colonizer's strategy to keep the colonized locked into fixed sectors of subservience and docility.⁹⁴ In view of Fanon's inventory of mental violence, Pharaoh's plan may contain psychological dimensions that aim to terrorize the midwives in both social and theological ways.⁹⁵

That Pharaoh means to exert social violence is clear. Given that women are responsible for the production of ethnic and racial groups,⁹⁶ and that male heirs are necessary for the inheritance of property, name, and social status, to redefine the midwives' profession is to strip them of a central, life-giving and society-forming role. Theologically, Genesis has done much to impress upon the reader the link between child birthing and divine promises. To uncouple these corresponding elements by the slaughter of male boys is to enact unparalleled psycho-social torment on the Hebrew midwives.

Perhaps Pharaoh is not making a tactical error by allowing subversive women to thwart his plan. Conceivably, he may be curious to see if the ruthlessness exacted on the male workforce has demoralized and degraded the willpower of the professional female classes with better results.⁹⁷ If so, then there is a certain

94 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14; *The Wretched of the Earth*, 15.

95 See chapter 4 (below) for a fuller discussion of Fanon.

96 Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 220.

97 An interesting echo is heard in this episode tying it with verses 11 and 12. Most translations convey the *piel* infinitive עָנָה as "to oppress/afflict" (NRSV, ASV, JPS, KJV, NAB, NAS, NET, NIV), but a secondary meaning of עָנָה (along with *pual* and *hiphil* forms) carries what

symmetry to Pharaoh's ploys. The first targeted the Israelite community by abusing the laboring male population. The second is more refined. It is aimed at the community of infant boys through the female midwives.

Pharaoh's tactic indicates that he still obeys his own sense of exclusionist ethnocentricity. He is certainly willing to allow the Others to join in, but they must reorder their selfhood to fit the needs of empire. For Pharaoh, identity is a commodity to be controlled; an object to be manipulated at will. Can it be that subjugation is so embedded in the mind of the Hebrews that even midwives will be made into murderers? Will life-givers become life-takers? If he can re-assign the midwives' identity, perhaps nothing can thwart future plans. Pharaoh, as in the story of Babel, can go about aggregating all difference to become Egyptian. Pharaoh's power can go unchecked, creating marionettes at will. Indeed, if he can turn the gatekeepers of life against their own ontology, then perhaps an entire calendar of exploitation will be possible. Perhaps with sustained pressure, even hardened Israelite men can yet assimilate.

The picture of Pharaoh is here complicated. He is not simply the flat villain of mainstream interpretation who succumbs to his own folly and is easily outwitted by a duo of trickster women.⁹⁸ Neither is he an ignorant ruler. The midwives certainly outmaneuver him with their response, but for reasons

might be considered psychological dimensions. See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:853. For example, CEB translates the verb as "to harass them"; CEV, NJB, NLT gloss "wear them down"; GNT, TEV offer "crush their spirit"; and WYC has "torment them." The context of verses 11–12 is certainly one of physical labor, but the impact of the midwives' episode hearkens back to the affliction of the men, thus creating the possibility of an interesting symmetry. Could it be that in light of the midwives' episode, עָנָו should be rendered as "to humiliate them"? Is Pharaoh here attempting another humiliation?

- 98 So Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch*, 139, 146; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 13, 17. See further his "The Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84 (1965): 120; Rylaarsdam, "The Book of Exodus (exegesis)," 856–857; Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 32–33; Jacob, *The Second Book*, 21; Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch* (SBL 117; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 63–68; Robert C. Culley, "Themes and Variations in Three Groups of OT Narratives," in "Classical Hebrew Narrative," ed. Robert C. Culley, special issue, *Semeia* 3 (1975): 3–13; J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts About Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1:8–2:10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 82; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:252; John F. Craghan, *Exodus* (ColBC 3; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1985), 11; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., "Dupe," *DBI*, 222; cf. "Outwitting, Stories of," 617–618; "Reversal," 717–719; "Tyrant, Tyranny," 903–904; Weems, "The Hebrew Women," 29.

outlined above, it is heavy-handed to suggest that Pharaoh falls victim to their ruse. Neither should stressing the comedic qualities of the chapter cause the reader to laugh *at* Pharaoh or consider him duped.⁹⁹ Though he is certainly guilty of underestimating the danger of Hebrew women,¹⁰⁰ the overwhelming balance of Exod 1 proves Pharaoh to be a worthy adversary.

There have been clues to Pharaoh's rather incisive thinking up to this point. He alone was quick to spot the profusion of Israelites (v. 9) reported by the narrator. He is a capable orator who in the proem of his argument "creates a community of values that both stimulates the egoism of the audience and enhances the appeal of the speaker."¹⁰¹ He was rightly nervous about the client population leaving the land to strike out on their own (v. 10). The people indeed "go up" (Exod 3:8, 17; 12:38; 13:18; 17:3; 32:7, 8, 23; 33:1, 12).¹⁰² Pharaoh is unwilling to underestimate the Israelite people. In the span of just a few clauses, he appeals to Egyptian fear with rhetoric that matches population growth with threat and reclassifies the client population from cohabitants to subjected labor force. This latter move he manages without putting Egypt's security in peril,¹⁰³ thus converting the problem of Israelite fecundity into a state resource.¹⁰⁴ So subtle and cunning is his brief rhetorical flourish (v. 9–10) that no response from the elite Egyptian audience is recorded. In its stead the narrator interjects with further details of abuse (v. 11).

99 Ackerman comments on the pun between "Joseph" and Pharaoh's lack of knowledge about "the one who adds, increases." So too, Pharaoh's fear in verse 10 utilizes the same word. He is most anxious about being "Josephed." Most humorous is the fact that, try as he might, Pharaoh's policies serve only to unloose the Israelite population explosion. "The Moses Birth Story," 80; cf. Gendi, "Pharaoh as a Character in Exodus 1–2," 65; Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., "Humor," *DBI*, 408–409; on ethnic slurs/jokes see Johnny Miles, "'Who Are You Calling Stupid?' Ethnocentric Humour and Identity Construct in the Colonial Discourse of Judges 3.12–30," *BCT* 4 (2008): 04.1–04.16; David Jobling and Catherine Rose, "Reading as a Philistine: The Ancient and Modern History of a Cultural Slur," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 381–417; Christie Davies, "Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries," *BJS* 33 (1982): 384; Ferdinand Deist, "Boundaries and Humour: A Case Study From the Ancient Near East," *Sca* 63 (1997): 415–424; cf. J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 49.

100 See Weems, "The Hebrew Women," 29–30.

101 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 48–49.

102 Brueggemann, "Exodus," 694.

103 Kaiser, "Exodus," 304.

104 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 131.

Pharaoh's attempt at a clandestine plan with the help of the midwives may indicate an unwillingness to admit the failure of the initial scheme¹⁰⁵ or perhaps a strategy intended to discourage retaliatory revolt. Or better yet, it is simply an attempt to neutralize population growth at the very moment it takes place. In verse 18, an attentive Pharaoh knows immediately that the plan has malfunctioned and calls the women to account.¹⁰⁶ He uses the forceful term "kill" (מֹת) in his private interaction with the midwives but opts for more restrained execution language, "you shall throw" (תְּשַׁלְּכֶנּוּ), in the public scene that concludes the chapter (v. 22).¹⁰⁷ Even in his anger Pharaoh shows a modicum of control and restraint.

In sum, these are hardly the tactics of a simpleminded despot. As will be argued below, the response of the midwives (v. 19) makes this clear. Their "explanation" to Pharaoh is more than clever repartee. It must be understood as a counterweight to Pharaoh's rigid notions of selfhood.

Identity Re-defined: Difference as a Tool for Resistance and the Midwives' Hybridic Way (Exodus 1:17–19)

1:17 But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt instructed them, but they let the children live. 18 So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and allowed the children to live?" 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are lively (just like animals), they give birth before the midwife comes to them."

Exod 1:17–19

Pharaoh's static model of differencing comes under critique in verses 17–19. The adversative *waw* that opens verse 17 (but) alerts the reader to the coming deception. We are not privy to Shiprah and Puah's private dialogue. There is little time or interest in protracted morality talk for those facing such wanton extermination. The complicit silence of the Egyptian population at Pharaoh's plan (vv. 9–10) is now matched with the initial silence of the Hebrew heroes. The unthinking speechlessness of the Egyptians is equaled by the midwives but

¹⁰⁵ Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Jacob, *The Second Book*, 22.

moves in the opposite direction. One silence was a participative sign leading to the anguish of laborers. The other is a pregnant pause leading to life.

The midwives move to action, or inaction, as it were. They perform their midwifery duties but, through passive subterfuge, decline to carry out the last destructive instructions.¹⁰⁸ Unwilling to behave against their professional mandate, Shiphrah and Puah are, in effect, answering to a higher authority. Fearful as Pharaoh is, God inspires a yet greater fear/reverence (v. 17).¹⁰⁹ Attentive to the failure of his plan and curious to discover the reasoning behind the midwives' foundering, Pharaoh summons the women to account (v. 18). His use of מִדּוּעַ is more than a simple interrogative, it invites a detailed explanation.¹¹⁰

Further defiance comes from the lips of the two women charged to carry out the fiendish plan. Only now, when life is at stake, are the voices of the oppressed heard. The narrator reports the boldness of the midwives. Magonet suggests that the narrator's note about the midwives responding to "Pharaoh" (v. 19) and not "the king of Egypt" (vv. 15, 17–18) is part of a strategy by which the courage of the midwives is set in relief.¹¹¹ They refuse to be awed by the monarch's title and status. The narrator further accentuates the audaciousness and importance of the midwives' reply by placing it in chiasmic¹¹² crosshairs.

108 According to Sarna, the verbal form can also convey the notion of sustaining life (2 Sam 12:3; Ps 33:19; Neh 9:6). *Exodus*, 7.

109 Cassuto suggests a possible anagram word-play between לִירְאָתִי (v. 16) and לִירְאָתִי (v. 17). Pharaoh's desire that the midwives "look" upon the birthstool/two stones is rejected. Rather, the midwives respond with "fear." *A Commentary*, 14; cf. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 72–73. Analogously, Propp references the customary use of these similar roots in other texts (Exod 14:13, 30–31; 1 Sam 12:16–18; 1 Kgs 3:28). *Exodus 1–18*, 140. Dozeman elaborates on the force of the word-play by asking, "Will the midwives conform to the command of Pharaoh and act upon what they 'see,' namely the birth of Hebrew male babies condemned to death by the state? Or will they follow their conscience and act because they 'feared the God'?" *Exodus*, 73.

110 Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 49.

111 Jonathan Magonet, "The Names of God in Biblical Narratives," in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer* (ed. Jon Davies, Graham Harvey, and Wilfred G.E. Watson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 80–81.

112 Verses 17–22 do not demonstrate a strict chiasm. The unit, however, bears chiasmic features. Following Davies, I opt for the adjective "chiasmic" rather than the more common term "chiasm," which some interpreters limited to the exact repetition of inverted words. The generalized nature of the term "chiasmic" is better suited to capture the transposed parallelism of synonyms and pronouns in the current text. *Israel in Egypt*, 21–22.

- A 1:17 Midwives author life: But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the children live.
- B 1:18 Pharaoh reacts to the midwives: So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and allowed the children to live?"
- C 1:19 The reply of the midwives: The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are lively (just like animals), they give birth before the midwife comes to them."
- B' 1:20–21 God reacts to the midwives: So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew vast. And it came to pass that because the midwives feared God, he made for them houses.
- A' 1:22 Pharaoh authors death: Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son that is born you shall throw into the river, but every daughter you shall let live."

As the framing indicates,¹¹³ at the heart of the matter is an exculpatory explanation. Faced with an impossible situation, the midwives are sly and duplicitous.¹¹⁴ As Walter C. Kaiser notes, "They commented on what was true without giving all the details."¹¹⁵

On the face of it, the midwives attribute the failure of Pharaoh's plan to logistical challenges. They must combat Pharaoh with a logical argument. They cannot very well take a child from his family to murder him surreptitiously if they (or one of their staff) are not on site for his birth.¹¹⁶ Ironically, the midwives

113 Andiañach detects other chiastic elements in which the core is a pair of reactions. The first is the negative reaction of Pharaoh in light of the disobedience of the midwives (vv. 18–19). The second is the positive reaction of God in light of their disobedience. *Éxodo*, 34. Exum sees a similar chiastic structure. See "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live,'" 46–51. For a brief discussion of chiastic possibilities in vv. 15–22 see Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 71–73.

114 Ackerman notes that for Hebrews lacking status and outside legal protections, "Shrewd cunning was the only resource of the defenseless." "The Moses Birth Story," 88. Goldingay maintains that truth-telling is here not seen as a rigid concept, but "as part of a broader truthful relationship" wherein the powerless midwives are not compelled to speak truth to those who oppress them. *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone*, (ES; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 9.

115 Kaiser, "Exodus," 306.

116 Scott Morschauser argues that the Pharaoh's instructions reflect a popular Egyptian saying associated with the creator god Khnum. In light of this, Pharaoh's plan is for the midwives to kill Hebrew boys *in utero*. To "look upon the potter's wheel" (וּרְאִיתָן עַל-הָאִבְנִים), fol-

are here appealing to Pharaoh's sense of humanity and appropriateness, much like the sister's appeal to his daughter in the chapter that follows (2:7). But that is not all. The midwives match and exceed Pharaoh's boldness with their own. In delivering their answer, the midwives cleverly insert the reason for the logistical failure. Hebrew sexual potency is mirrored in the efficiency of Hebrew childbearing and even outpaces the arrival of the birthing personnel. The bursting (פרץ) of verse 12 has not been quelled after all; multiplication continues unabated.

The midwives report that Hebrew women are unlike Egyptian women (v. 19). Hebrew women undertake the process of labor expediently; Egyptian women do not. Aside from the obvious reiteration about the Hebrew power to multiply, the retort makes clear that the Hebrews' longing for life extends *even to their newborns*. This eagerness, no doubt, seeks to frighten an already unsettled Pharaoh. The message is clear. The oppressed people yearn to exist, so much so, that the usual trappings of the birth process are unnecessary. The Hebrew women, "invested with dangerous, liberated power for life,"¹¹⁷ will negotiate births on their own, and on a shortened timetable at that.

The midwives' defiant response explains more than a logistical failure. Its subtext reveals yet deeper dimensions which help to uncover more of Pharaoh's dichotomizing identity politics. According to Renita Weems, the rebuttal of the midwives is founded on Pharaoh's own construction of difference along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and biology.¹¹⁸ Their reply comes in terms that Pharaoh understands. The response of the midwives fights back by first adopting difference, weaponizing it, and finally hurling it back onto Pharaoh and his people. In so doing, the midwives imitate the essentialist and prejudicial logic of Egypt.¹¹⁹

The keystone of this defiance culminates in the midwives' use of the *hapax* plural adjective חיות.¹²⁰ The word is typically glossed by English translations

lowing Jer 18:3, is to examine a child in the process of being formed. "Potters' Wheels and Pregnancies: A Note on Exodus 1:16," *JBL* 122 (2003): 731–733.

117 Brueggemann, "Exodus," 696.

118 Weems, "The Hebrew Women," 28. See also Neil Elliott, "Exodus (critical notes)," in *The Peoples' Bible* (ed. Curtis Paul DeYoung et al.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 187.

119 Weems also laments that difference is not wholly unraveled by the midwives/narrator. Rather, according to Weems, they recast and invert difference to suit their purposes. "The Hebrew Women," 25–34. However, as I argue below, the midwives' playful reassigning of meaning for difference reveals the senselessness of differencing tactics and redefines difference in a positive fashion.

120 As in Midrash Rabbah, Siebert-Hommes considers the importance of the word as set in the

in terms of physical strength: “vigorous” (NRSV, TNK, NASB, NIV, ESV, NET), “lively” (ASV, KJV), “alive” (JPS), “robust” (NAB), “hardy” (NJB). While the word relays a general sense of vitality, toughness, constitution, and drive, if considered the plural of the noun חיה through emendation, it refers explicitly to wild animals or beasts (similarly, Isa 35:9; Ps 104:25).¹²¹ Given that both renderings are congenial, the prudent choice may be to let the word’s final translation be polysemic.¹²² That is, the term connotes vigor/liveliness and also carries zoological dimensions. The above translation, “They are lively (just like animals),” seeks to convey these dual meanings.

G.R. Driver understands the scandalous ramifications captured in the word. He suggests that this shocking animalistic expression assumes that the midwives are indeed Egyptians. For how could an Israelite so willfully disparage her own people?¹²³ Here again a postcolonial analysis of representation can be instructive. Can it be that self-deprecating language serves the needs of resistance? If so, how?

To answer in the affirmative, we must recall that חיות corresponds with the animalizing rhetoric that the narrator has already appropriated to describe the growth of Israelite reproduction in verse 7. In that instance the people were said to “teem” (שרץ) like creatures of the sea, earth, and air. The reuse of animalistic imagery put on the lips of the midwives complements the narrator’s animal reference. In verse 7 the curious use of שרץ hinted at Egyptian prejudice and fear of unstoppable Israelite births, while also adumbrating what would come. Here it indicates that Pharaoh’s oppressive tactics have indeed been based, in part, on stereotypes. The narrator and the midwives are in unison. Each takes up the language of animal vitality to ridicule the oppressor’s wayward ideology.

midst of an -ot rhyming repetition in the midwives’ answer (כִּי לֹא כְנָשִׁים הַמִּצְרִיִּים הָעֹבְדִים בְּיָדָהּ). *Let the Daughters Live!* 19. Siebert-Hommes also sees the word as central to the concentric structure of verses 16–22. 65, 104.

121 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:310. But Siebert-Hommes makes a case against translating “animal, wild beast.” Based on the consistent use of “live” (חָיָה) in verses 16, 17, 18 and 22, verse 19 is likely to follow suit, thus making “life,” in her view, the most likely translation. *Let the Daughters Live!* 101–110. Similarly, G.R. Driver notes that to produce “like wild animals” in prose, one would expect בְּחַיִּוֹת. “Hebrew Mothers: Exodus 1:19,” *ZAW* 67 (1955): 247.

122 Siebert-Hommes captures the word’s multivalent qualities by conceding, “It appears that the word חַיִּוֹת should be understood to be polysemantic. All types of inferences together colour its meaning, so that it becomes difficult to translate it appropriately. In all events, the term chosen for this word must contain the concept of life.” *Let the Daughters Live!* 109.

123 Driver, “Hebrew Mothers,” 247. See further Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:257.

However, through their mischievous response, “They are lively (just like animals),” the midwives take on a more offensive stance than that which the narrator reported. The midwives are unafraid to exact vengeance. If I am right about the Pharaoh’s fidelity to difference, then part of Pharaoh’s strategy to convince his people that Israelites are dangerous is based in the strategy of assumption and misrepresentation. As Gayatri Spivak makes clear, those in power mark the marginalized by making their difference the indicator of their identity.¹²⁴ More than embellishing their numbers and capabilities, securing the complicity of his people relies on the sinister connection Pharaoh draws between Israelites and savagery. By extension, Egyptians are cast as civilized, tame, and ordered. The midwives, therefore, use Pharaoh’s own racist tropes against him. They recognize Pharaoh’s quintessentialized identity ideology, choose to traffic within its boundaries of predetermined difference, but opt to subvert it from within through a clever inversion of expected cultural norms. They exploit the Egyptian perception of difference to their advantage.

The midwives draw a contrast between the Hebrew “animals” and the Egyptian women.¹²⁵ The midwives (with tongue in cheek) blunt Egyptian power by affirming that they *do* breed like wild animals. In so doing, they hurl back upon Pharaoh his own racist logic, but repurpose it to champion the strength of Hebrew women while belittling the resolve of Egyptian women. Egyptian women are no match for Hebrew women. The Hebrew women exemplify biological superiority. Hebrew peculiarity, according to the midwives, *supersedes* that of Egyptian mothers. Egyptian civility, tameness, and order are recast as uninterestingly normative, expected, and so, unremarkable. Egyptian women are re-inscribed with difference insofar as they are excessively delicate, and so, perhaps also vulnerable.

It is the *Hebrew* women who are extraordinary. If they are indeed different, then the content of that difference exceeds the commonalities that mark Egyptian women. Paradoxically, difference is at once a great strength legitimizing Hebrew mothers, and also a marker of Egyptian weakness. Difference, the midwives postulate, is not only a feature of the reviled Other, it has contaminated Pharaoh’s own people, and so, made them *also* into an Other. Thus, through their mischievous response, the midwives not only demonstrate a capacity for ingenious retaliation, but by co-opting the language of animal vitality, they reveal and ridicule Egyptian exclusivist ideology, and indeed, undermine the strategy of difference-making altogether.

124 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 272.

125 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 140.

The actions of the midwives correspond to the phenomenon of hybridity as related to the categories of ambivalence and mimicry heavily theorized by Bhabha in largely non-historicized ways.¹²⁶ In his analysis of subjectivity Bhabha considers the conflicted inner workings of the colonizer/colonized relationship. Against Said who locates power with the colonizer, Bhabha maintains that colonial discourse is itself imbued with self-destructive potential. Against Spivak, Bhabha holds that the colonized subject *is* capable of recovering speech and agency.

Bhabha explains this process as marked primarily by nervousness over the existence and role of the Other. Within the colonial condition, those in power employ stereotypes that domesticate the colonized, making them familiar, safe, knowable. The Otherness of the colonized subject is eliminated as she/he is placed within the predictable and controllable boundaries of Western discourse. However, the colonizer also uses stereotypes to delineate and maintain the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the colonized. The mythic discourse of colonialism seeks after containment. It makes subjected people into the embodiment of difference, wildness, grotesqueries, degeneracy, and mystery. As postcolonial theory teaches, the colonizing Self galvanizes its personal identity by first producing its opposite. For as Derrida has commented, "every culture is haunted by its other [*sic*]."¹²⁷

The colonizer wishes for an Other that is both different while also being altogether recognizable and familiar. The subjected group finds itself caught in the tension between the inherent attraction and repulsion of colonial discourse. They are simultaneously "fixations and phantoms."¹²⁸ They slide to and fro between extremes of sameness and difference, disrupting the simple equation of power between colonizer and colonized. As a result, the Other is never *fully* "othered" by the dominant discourse.

Bhabha terms this phenomenon of contradiction and incoherence as "ambivalence."¹²⁹ The Other is "*almost the same but not quite*."¹³⁰ Thus colonial ideol-

126 Sugirtharajah explains this feature of Bhabha against the "reading strategy" model of Said and Spivak. For Sugirtharajah, Bhabha "sees postcoloniality as a condition of being." *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 15.

127 Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (ed. Richard Kearney; Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984), 116.

128 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 166.

129 Ibid., 94–174. For a summary of Bhabhian ambivalence see Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 2004), 181–198.

130 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122. Italics in the text; cf. 129.

ogy deconstructs and disables its own authority. It grows in anxiety, insecurity, and paranoia at every turn as it continually repeats stereotypes in an attempt to finally capture that which cannot be captured, the colonized subject. Bhabha explains the nature of this fracture:

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always “in place,” already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.¹³¹

The use of stereotypes to halt the motion results in still further and more deeply entrenched ambivalence. Stereotypes fail to produce fixity because, by their very nature, they are implements of Othering that depend on networks of stereotypes for their meaning.

Colonial discourse, therefore, splits and doubles the colonized subject, placing his/her identity in the hybridic locale between the powerful master and the larger community of the powerless. Hybridity is a byproduct of colonial authority. It is not a mechanism for synthesizing difference, but rather, for existing within it to terrorize authority.¹³²

The real-world manifestation of ambivalence is what Bhabha describes as “mimicry.” As an umbrella term, mimicry encapsulates multiple strategies employed by the colonized to author resistance. The colonized recapture power by imitating the tropes of colonial authority (though never in an exact way) and inhabiting (but never fully) the colonial myths and languages of colonizers. The colonized adopt a brand of camouflage that appears to reinscribe colonial domination, but in fact exposes the ambivalences and uncertainties of that domination. The act of mimicry, recognized by those in power, destabilizes such power. By mimicking the behaviors of the colonial master through the use of irony, satire, and parody, the colonized combat the alterity imposed on them and begin to recover power, dignity, and agency while living within the framework of imperial authority. Mimicry is a practice of disciplined subtlety. It slips easily into a mockery masked with politeness, courteousness, and cordiality.

¹³¹ Ibid., 94–95.

¹³² Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1997), 134.

By taking up their doubled identity, the colonized threaten the very power that differences them and upholds the supremacy of the colonizer.¹³³ The simplistic logic that would make the colonizer into the sole locus of power, and the colonized into that of powerlessness, is disrupted. Thus the system of oppositional distinction is undercut by mimicry. As Bhabha terms it, this is a “sly civility” by which the colonized subjects “face two ways without being two-faced.”¹³⁴

Analogously, the midwives play with the category of difference in a way that reveals its pliability. Hybridity does not only capture the ambivalent position of the midwives, but—in light of Bhabha’s thinking—it is also a resistance technique. The hybridic position of the women is not inert. The midwives expose, redeploy, and reject the Pharaoh’s differencing tactics. Their inversion of difference from that which marks Hebrews to that which marks Egyptians reveals the absurdity of the differencing game all together. The midwives aim to torment Pharaoh through their strategy. As Bhabha explains it, “The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”¹³⁵ Childs and Williams note:

Hybridity shifts power, questions discursive authority and suggests, contrary to the implication of Said’s concept of Orientalism, that colonial discourse is never wholly in the control of the colonizer. Its authority is always reinflected, split, syncretized, and to an extent menaced, by its confrontation with its object.¹³⁶

Those in power are haunted by their inability to control those under their authority. Just as Pharaoh uses stereotypes to mythologize Hebrew identity as bestial, so now the midwives produce a counter-narrative which claims and repurposes that very stereotype to afflict Pharaoh on psychological and social levels. They use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.

Fictitious as the midwives’ report is, the message to Pharaoh strikes with accuracy at his monolithic sense of national identity. The Pharaoh’s Manichean logic proves absurd. Difference is recast by the midwives as an instrument of opposition, for it is this reassessed difference that brings life and frustrates empire. While the reader is not told Pharaoh’s reaction to the insult indirectly hurled at him and his people, what is clear is that in this instance the midwives

133 On the threat of mimicry see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122–123.

134 *Ibid.*, 138.

135 *Ibid.*, 126. *Italics* in the text; cf. 128–129.

136 Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, 134.

are unwilling to stand idly by. They will not only slight Pharaoh in action, but will retaliate by reclaiming and rehabilitating Israelite identity—along with Subjectivity—in the midst of the dialogue.¹³⁷ They refuse to be subsumed in the drama. Theirs is the last word.¹³⁸ They boldly “speak truth to power.”¹³⁹

Pharaoh, we have seen, is not an unintelligent figure outsmarted by the midwives. In Exod 1 he orchestrates a scheme by which to gauge the profundity of Hebrew brokenness. Pharaoh learns that he has underestimated the resolve of his colonial subjects, and that identity cannot be dictated from a position of power. He cannot reorder it as he sees fit. It is shaped by the will of groups and individuals to serve *their* needs. Human identity is perhaps the one thing outside of his control.

Isolating two women from the larger community does not in the least dilute their resolve. Whether the Hebrew people are attacked on the exterior (laboring masses, collectively), or whether they are attacked on the interior (midwives, interpersonally), the results are unchanged. The midwives refuse to bend. They refuse to betray. Whether in large numbers or in small ones, all of Israel pulls as one. Pharaoh’s plan does not exhaust the reservoir of Israelite will to life.

Pharaoh comes to the realization that the vitality existing in the Hebrew men also exists among the Hebrew women. Specifically, the midwives he so longed to rebrand as Egyptian exist as colonial mimics. The midwives come to embody the deep vulnerability of colonial subjugation. Try as colonialists might, they can never compel the colonized to remain static. The Other will always look too similar, and so suggest that those in power are themselves Other. Or they will appear too different, and so, too dangerous. It is no wonder that the result of the confrontation episode between Pharaoh and the midwives is still greater paranoia and anxiety that culminates in all-out, open-air, slaughter (v. 22).

Unlike their Egyptian overlords who crisply delineate haves and have-nots, the midwives recreate, reclaim, and reoccupy the hyphenated Joseph space that was once closed to them in verse 8. These Israelite women must maneuver between the powered existence of the Egyptians and the powerless existence of

137 The narrator is also in the process of exerting control over the monarch. Siebert-Hommes notices how the introduction of Pharaoh in verse 15 is given in two words, against the nine words for the midwives. So lopsided are these introductions that in verse 16 the narrator is forced to repeat the opening of verse 15 (וַיֹּאמֶר). *Let the Daughters Live!* 25.

138 Exum, “You Shall Let Every Daughter Live,” 43.

139 Stephen G. Cary et al., *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1955).

their Israelite kin group. Shiphrah and Puah choose to remain simultaneously located *and* dislocated. Their trouble and triumph leads them to occupy a space between the extremes of assimilating on the one hand, and the dangerous possibility of all-out rebellion on the other.

While the reader might expect the Hebrew clan to indeed advocate for explicit nativist resistance, that option cannot materialize in a situation of such vast power inequality and class struggle. By refusing to enact overt rebellion, the *midwives* live into their *mid*-ness. They refuse to forfeit their unique multi-stanced, in-between locality. The imperial ultimatum only serves to solidify their values and identity.¹⁴⁰

The midwives not only combat the venomous desires of Pharaoh while fighting for human survival, but they orchestrate their own professional survival as well. To be relieved of their duties, or worse yet, to be killed for overt insolence, would be to divest themselves of an important role as intermediaries between empire and fellow subalterns. To shake their fists at the empire in any obvious way would be to surrender further pragmatic roles. Midwives consulted for more than the birthing event, they were seminal to the entire rearing process.¹⁴¹ Moreover, to defy Egypt blatantly would be to abandon future life-saving missions.

By opting as they do for the middle way, “the midwives blur the boundaries of separate ethnic identities.”¹⁴² Like Joseph before them, they settle themselves between and betwixt margins and center as fellow life-preserving agents endowed with authority and credibility. They step into what Sugirtharajah calls the “uncolonialized space.”¹⁴³ The evasive and mimicking tactics of the midwives demonstrate that human identity can be understood as something composite and fluctuating, un beholden to singularity and always multiple. Identity as difference is held up as an element to be celebrated and cultivated, not rejected and reviled. Against Egyptian xenophobia and malice, the midwives represent authentic outlier identity as pliable, polyvalent, daring, creative, subversive, God-fearing, and above all, hybridic.

The courageous duo of chapter 1 slips from the narrative after this episode,¹⁴⁴ but the two leave a lasting and resilient impression. Their example of

140 Ackerman, “The Moses Birth Story,” 86.

141 See Meyers, *Exodus*, 40–41.

142 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 74–75.

143 Sugirtharajah, “Orientalism, Ethnonationalism and Transnationalism,” 427.

144 Exum is particularly troubled by the ways in which the courageous women of Exod 1–2 are tools of, and beholden to, the narrator’s androcentric interests. She laments the fact that the story of the five females securing the life of the male Moses fades as the

multi-stance shows them to be important precursors to the characters that follow. They not only presage the life-giving deeds that Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter will perform in the next few verses, but they also prefigure another multi-stanced individual, Moses. While the narrative will cast him as the supreme example of a socio-cultural in-betweener, he is certainly not the first to hold such status. He has had capable and equally courageous forerunners. Their legacy lives on in him.

Identity Re-entrenched: Pharaoh's Ethnocentric Call to Action (Exodus 1:20–22)

1:20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew vast. 21 And it came to pass that because the midwives feared God, he made for them houses. 22 Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every son that is born you shall throw into the river, but every daughter you shall let live."

Exod 1:20–22

Observant but inactive, God responds to human resourcefulness without directly inspiring or orchestrating it. There is no divine interruption, only divine reward. Human responsibility is a resource that is here exhausted before God comes forward. The actions of the women have done enough to stem the tide of infanticide. In the nervous moments of the Pharaoh-midwives confrontation, the reader is reminded that God is present in a position of highest authority. In light of that reality, Pharaoh's response is postponed for a full two verses (v. 22). The reaction of God now matters most.

narrative continues to advance. See again, "Second Thoughts," 75–87. See further Kirk-Duggan who, following Exum, sees the women of Exodus as typecast and diffused for the sake of elevating Moses. "Let My People Go!: Threads of Exodus in African American Narratives," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 258–278; cf. "How Liberating is the Exodus and for Whom? Deconstructing Exodus Motifs in Scripture, Literature, and Life," in *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (Texts @ Contexts; ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 3–28; "Divine Puppeteer: Yahweh of Exodus," in *Exodus to Deuteronomy: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 83–84. Similarly, on the diminishment of female agency in the betrothal scenes of Genesis and Exodus, see Esther Fuchs, "Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes," *JFSR* 3 (1987): 7–13.

Between the midwives' statement and the unfurling of Pharaoh's revised plan, the narrator interjects to recall God's gracious provision for the women (v. 20). While God has yet to step fully to the fore,¹⁴⁵ God has not been absent. The life-making priorities of God, set forth in Genesis, have been exercised in the expansive multiplications of the people (vv. 7, 8, 10, 12) and now more vividly in the reward of "houses"¹⁴⁶ for the midwives (v. 21). The Pharaoh's building project is trumped by another kind of building. The first construction program leads to suppression and suffering, while the second leads to life.¹⁴⁷ The midwives are recompensed in a fashion befitting their life-saving behavior and Hebrew reproductive abilities. Like the vindication of Job's appropriate speech (Job 42:7), so now the reward of the midwives indicates that they too have spoken what is right. God rewards their resistance and cleverness with more increase.

Seeing that his plan has not broken the Hebrews' will, for a third time Pharaoh takes matters into his hands. In this final move the reader senses increased emotion in Pharaoh. The act of instructing by "saying" (vv. 9, 15, 16) is now replaced with the more forceful *piel* פִּעַל (Then he charged/commanded).¹⁴⁸ Unable to thwart Israelite numbers by hard work and unable to turn Hebrew life-givers into death-dealers, Pharaoh returns to his intransigent notion of identity. His insiders will carry out the decree.¹⁴⁹ What was once the

145 The use of the definite article with "God" (הָאֱלֹהִים) in verse 21 echoes that of verse 17. Dozeman notes that both uses of the word create a sense of remoteness, which functions to set up YHWH's personal revelation in Exod 3. In his view, the dual uses of הָאֱלֹהִים are also meant to indicate "the loss of memory" that transpires between Genesis and Exodus. Thus the words accentuate the midwives' lack of knowledge. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 73, 77.

146 A range of possibilities exist for what is here translated as "houses." For discussion see Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 141.

147 Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 42.

148 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 16.

149 Verse 22 is open to debate among the translations. The Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, and Targum insert "to the Hebrews" which is lacking in the MT. Against the major translations, the NRSV includes the phrase. To omit "to the Hebrews" may suggest that the death instruction is also directed at the Hebrew populace (ASV, JPS, TNK, NAB, NAS, NIV, NJB, NKJV, NET). In other words, it becomes plausible to suggest that the narrator's "his people" is meant to encompass even the underclass Hebrews. The implication is that Pharaoh considers the Hebrews as *his* own, and is again asking them to murder themselves. However, the context suggests otherwise. Given that Pharaoh has proven himself a worthy and intelligent adversary, it is unlikely that he would call mothers to murder their own children. Neither is it conceivable that, in light of Pharaoh's consistent attempts to differentiate insiders from outsiders, he would suddenly number Israelites as "his." Those that

work of taskmasters and a duo of women now includes “all his people” (v. 22). By imperial decree, all Egyptians become royal executioners.

Pharaoh’s pronouncement not only enlarges the killing force, it also expands the death sites from those of humble homes to the expansive locales of the Nile. The act of declaration serves to heighten the irony in Exod 1 by accentuating the monarch’s extreme power over and against his profound helplessness. Pharaoh’s supremacy, it would seem, is potent enough to radically redefine a client population for the benefit of empire. So too, storage cities meant to preserve life are converted into instruments of abuse and control. Finally, the Nile comes under Pharaoh’s control. No longer a locale of life-giving potential, it is refashioned into a place of death. Capable of overturning state and natural resources at will, Pharaoh is undone by a pair of lowly Hebrew midwives. Unlike the physical world, which Pharaoh freely refashions to his desired ends, those who occupy low social positions are wholly uncontrollable.

The cleverness of the birth-room plan, with its stealthy dimensions, is no more. The cloak of secrecy is stripped away. By the conclusion of Exod 1, the matter is radicalized into open-air extermination. So too, Exod 1 creates a fitting symmetry with its introduction. The universal conflict between Pharaoh and the Hebrew boys of verse 22 reverses the universal trust between Israelites and the Pharaoh of the opening lines.¹⁵⁰ Irony remains even in this. Pharaoh’s weapon, water,¹⁵¹ will be turned against his own people in what is to come (14:26–29; 15:1–10). This dramatic commitment to Hebrew deaths and the conscription of every Egyptian, he believes, will assure success. This tactic, as Fanon appropriately describes it, is an example of “the colonialist hydra” at work.¹⁵² The moment that power seems defeated is often the moment it returns to life, exponentially replicating colonial agents and policies.

count as “his” are the Egyptians. The execution instructions are directed solely to them. For these reasons my translation omits the clause.

150 Davies makes the point that the reuse of כל in v. 22, seen previously in vv. 1–7, helps create the reversal. *Israel in Egypt*, 81.

151 Cogan and Childs translate תשליכוהו (“you shall throw”) as “expose.” Morton Cogan, “A Technical Term for Exposure,” *JNES* 27 (1968): 133–135; Childs, “The Birth of Moses,” 110–118. Similarly, Rabbi Yaakov Culi holds that Pharaoh, anxious about murdering innocents, decrees that they be placed at the water’s edge so as to allow the Nile’s waves to wash them away. *MeAm Lo’ez: Exodus 1* (trans. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; TA; New York: Maznaim, 1978), 34.

152 Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (trans. Haakon Chevalier; New York: Grove Press, 1965), 40.

Identity Made Complex: The Inclusive Pliability of Pharaoh's Daughter and "Moses" (Exodus 2:1–10)

2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as wife a Levite daughter. 2 And the woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was good, she hid him for three months. 3 And when she could no longer hide him she took for him a reed box and pitched it with bitumen and pitch. And she placed the child in it and she placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 And his sister stood at a distance, to learn what would become of him.

5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked alongside the river. And she saw the box in the midst of the reeds and sent her maid, and she took it. 6 And she opened it, and she saw it, the child; and behold, a boy crying. So she had compassion on him and said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call for you a wet-nurse from among the Hebrews, that she may nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go!" So the maid went and called the mother of the child. 9 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and even I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. 10 When the child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She called his name Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him from the water."

Exod 2:1–10

Resistance Repeated and Pharaoh's Daughter Anticipated

En route to crafting identity as ever-complex, 2:1–10 begins by continuing the sub-theme of clever resistance. This time another Israelite female is featured. Surprisingly, the woman of verse 1 is introduced as a בַּת־לֵוִי ("Levite daughter"), undoubtedly to create the analogy between herself, the Pharaoh's "daughter" to come (2:5–10),¹⁵³ and perhaps even her own daughter (2:4, 7–8). Additionally, Pharaoh's rather impulsive decree (1:22) is countered by the measured cadence of marital structure among the Hebrews. The twosome of the vignette hails from the same house. The couple presented is in every way an authorized

153 Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter ... She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1–2," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 67–68.

Israelite pairing. More importantly, their issue is of Levite origin,¹⁵⁴ which qualifies the unnamed child to later perform in sacerdotal capacities.

The influence of the Genesis text is also evident from the onset of Exod 2. The narrator need not rehearse the verbs of increase or replay the notes about Israelite fecundity to make the point. Try as he might, Pharaoh cannot stem the tide of Hebrew multiplication. As in 1:12, the perilous consequences for giving birth do not suppress the growth of Israelite numbers. The couple contributes to the pressure on Egypt. The Levite mother deems her child to be “good” (טוב). The word may relate to tranquility or mild demeanor, though it is also argued to be a statement about the child’s biological health/viability.¹⁵⁵ The mother’s usage of טוב is reminiscent of God’s use of the word to mark created order (Gen 1). The use of ראה (“to see”) in combination with טוב is yet another indication that like God in Gen 1, she sees and deems good.¹⁵⁶ The “good” that God does in Genesis, the Levite daughter is performing afresh. Additionally, the call to fill the earth is being fulfilled in the birth of the child. Another Genesis-like beginning and subsequent proliferation is underway.

Like Shiprah and Puah, the Levite woman is the prime actor. Realizing that the child can no longer be hidden, perhaps due to the increasing volume of his cries, she is forced to act.¹⁵⁷ The child’s health bears an element of uncontrollability. An echo of the midwives’ חיות is faint but plausible. Even Hebrews have difficulty hemming in their own vitality. The verbs that follow are swift, indicating the direness of the mother’s predicament. Her courage is expressed energetically. Following her “seeing” (ראה), she “hid” (צפן), she “took” (לקח) she “pitched” (חמר) and she “placed” (שם twice) the box and the child. Enterprising and tenacious, the verbal actions belong solely to her as the active agent.

The Levite mother’s construction of the box mirrors her male counterparts’ construction of storage cities (1:11–14).¹⁵⁸ The former building activity was for

154 Also see 6:14–26, where the Levite lineage of Moses and Aaron is made explicit.

155 Propp, *Exodus* 1–18, 149; Durham, *Exodus*, 16; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 18; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 80. Others, including Ibn Ezra and the LXX’s ἀστέρον, infer the word to mean handsomeness, beauty, or fairness (repeated in Acts 7:20 and Heb 11:23). Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:427. George Bush, *Notes on Exodus* (1852; repr., Minneapolis: James Family Christian Publishers, 1979), 23–24. However, such a translation does not seem ultimately satisfactory, for one cannot suppose that an unattractive child would have been cast into the Nile.

156 James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 27.

157 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 18. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 39. F.B. Meyer, *Exodus: Chapters 1–20* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1952), 23–24.

158 For Wicke, the balancing of labor between males in chapter 1 and the Levite woman of

communal survival and to service the needs of empire. This act of building is done for the child's individual survival. That fabrication brought death; this new box (תבה), like the one of Gen 6–8, will give buoyancy to life. As with the use of טוב, the recurrence of תבה ("box"), which appears only in the deluge story of Genesis, invites associations.¹⁵⁹ Like a treasure chest, it contains a precious one of great value. And like Noah, the infant will be preserved, though floating precariously upon the disorienting watery chaos. The child is suspended atop the threatening substance meant to effect his death. In the Levite mother, the reader sees creative activity on a small scale. Like God, she creates *and* protects life. Moreover, words using the חמר (bitumen, cement, mortar, clay) root are used in the records of both Exodus building projects (1:14; 2:3).¹⁶⁰ The building substance the empire has used to abuse Hebrew men is here used to shape the salvific vessel.¹⁶¹ A postcolonial reading has begun to identify an important thesis for the unit. The tools of empire can be transformed into tools for life. Transformation is not limited to building materials; it will soon extend into the life of an imperial figure.

The watertight vessel is placed with precision in the midst of the reeds, so as to prevent it from drifting downstream (v. 3).¹⁶² Against the Pharaoh's command to throw/flip (שליך) children carelessly into the Nile's water, the mother's double placing (the child in the box and the box in the water, v. 3) "implies gentle, loving action."¹⁶³ The tenderness of the setting down is also

chapter 2, along with a variety of other such features, suggests that 1:1–14 and 2:1–10 should be read as a single unit. Many of the lexical and thematic elements parallel and contrast one another. Donald W. Wicke, "The Literary Structure of Exodus 1:2–2:10," *JSTOT* 24 (1982): 99–107.

159 There is some variance on the question of allusive directness between the arks of Genesis and Exodus. Cassuto points out that Gen 6 catalogs the salvation of the macrocosm, while Exod 2 focuses on salvation in microcosm. *A Commentary*, 19. Moving in a different but perhaps complementary direction, Gispén offers the possibility that the ark construction may be meant to mime Egyptian baskets used to transport idols on the river. W.H. Gispén, *Exodus* (trans. Ed van der Maas; BSC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 39–40. Against the connection to Genesis altogether see Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:277. Davies compromises between extremes. He considers Genesis to be echoing through Exodus, calling the connection suggestive, rather than emphatic. He considers the connection to be a "reflection on the nature and purpose of the past within God's plan of history." *Israel in Egypt*, 106.

160 Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 73, 115.

161 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 27.

162 Sarna, *Exodus*, 9; cf. Jacob, *The Second Book*, 28.

163 Sarna, *Exodus*, 9; cf. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 116–117, 119; Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 18; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 147–149.

evinced in the deliberate triple description of the locale. She places the child in the shallows, “among the reeds on the bank of the river” (בְּסוֹף עַל-שִׁפְתֵי הַיָּאֵר) (v. 3). It would seem that the site is known to the Levite mother and daughter. It is unlikely that the Levite mother would leave the fate of her child to chance, though whether she herself is choosing a probable candidate to serve as caretaker remains an open question.

The sparseness of the text leaves us to speculate if the mother is putting her trust in the benevolent reputation of the princess, if she means to have him found by an anonymous Egyptian woman, or if she prefers “to expose the healthy, ‘goodly’ child to an uncertain fate than to leave him to a quite certain death.”¹⁶⁴ Whatever the mother’s intent, the choice of the river’s edge is rather sensible. It is a place where the child is sure to be found by a woman who has come to perform washing or preparation for cooking duties.¹⁶⁵

In the Levite mother’s actions, an imaginative reordering of the imperial decree is at work. It seems she has learned a lesson from the savvy midwives of the previous chapter. When pushed to her limit, the Levite mother seeks out inventive avenues. The child’s mother will indeed follow the state’s pronouncement, but she will negotiate it in a way that suits her desired ends.¹⁶⁶ A subtle critique is still operative. In chapter 1 the partial absurdity of Pharaoh’s plan

164 Noth, *Exodus*, 25–26. On the subject of whether this is strategy or coincidence, there is not unanimous agreement. Some commentators propose the intentional nature of the mother’s actions; so Oswalt, “Exodus,” 296–297. Durham argues to the contrary, reasoning that the scene is made suspenseful because the discoverer, a member of Pharaoh’s court, creates an unexpected and shocking twist. *Exodus*, 16. Houtman’s position mediates between extremes. He speculates that if the Levite mother intends for an Egyptian peasant woman to find the child, the appearance of the royal daughter is an altogether surprising and astonishing development contributing to the overall suspense of the scene. *Exodus*, 1:278.

165 R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 57–58.

166 On the popular exposed child motif, see Donald B. Redford, “The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child,” *Numen* 14 (1967): 202–228. Sarna, *Exodus*, 267–268. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 29–31. See further Propp’s discussion on the comparison of Exod 2 with the rich tradition of what he calls the “Floating Foundling” motif and the *Atrahasis* epic. *Exodus* 1–18, 155–160. Both Sarna and Propp detail the ways in which the Moses story borrows but deviates significantly from the established patterns of mainstream literature. See further Noth, *Exodus*, 26–27. Overwhelmingly, commentators argue that the Moses episode is an adaptation of the popular ANE motif and not a rigid repeat of it. On the implications of the interplay between historicity and literature upon biblical inspiration, see Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (NIVACS; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 59–61.

was on display. Similarly, now Pharaoh does not envision the possibility of an act that can simultaneously maintain and thwart his decree. The building of the box is a type of playful act. The mother partially obeys Pharaoh by following his expected means; namely, the throwing of children into the Nile. But her act also turns on Pharaoh by producing an outcome he does not intend. Unit-ing newborns with the Nile, for Pharaoh, is meant to generate death. This child comes into contact with the death site, but lives. The Levite mother's behavior is at once lawful and unruly.

The mother's cleverness is seen also in the hiding of the child where he is least likely to be sought, in the Nile itself.¹⁶⁷ Like the midwives have done, so now the Levite mother gives Egypt what it craves, but not in an expected manner. The example of the midwives is revived in the Levite mother. The Levite mother also lies to the empire. She follows the letter of the law but resists it in spirit to move toward a place of nuanced existence. Moreover, the mother's playful re-signification of Pharaoh's decree foreshadows another striking transformation still to come, that of Pharaoh's daughter.

The Royal Daughter's Sensitizing Effect

As the story momentarily shifts away from the Levite woman, a fourth female emerges in the person of the baby's sister, presumably Miriam (Exod 15:20, 21; Num 12:1, 4, 5, 10, 15; 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9; 1Chr 6:3; Mic 6:4). It is she who will stand sentry, looking on from a distance (v. 4) and prepared to author her own brand of courage. She is the first figure of the unit to place herself on a border. She means to "learn" (לָמַד) what will become of her brother. Never is the child abandoned or allowed to bob precariously among the bulrushes. Always he is under the watchful eye of his sisterly caretaker.¹⁶⁸ The sister's vigilance is matched by that of Pharaoh's daughter and her maidservant.

¹⁶⁷ Durham, *Exodus*, 16.

¹⁶⁸ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 18; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 40; Kaiser, "Exodus," 309; Gispén, *Exodus*, 40; Bruckner, *Exodus*, 28; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (trans. Charles William Bingham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950); 1:43. Alternatively, for Siebert-Hommes, מָרַחַק in verse 4 should be translated "afar off" as in the ASV and KJV (see Exod 23:7; Ps 38:12, 22). This translation conveys that the child is being "delivered up to death and is unavailable for human aid." This position is bolstered by the alternate gloss of צַב as "to stand one's ground" (Exod 8:16; 9:13; 14:13; 19:17; Num 11:16; 23:3, 15; Deut 31:14). "But If She Be a Daughter," 69–70; cf. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 117–118. If the sister is in no position to aid the child, the story takes on more desperate and emotional significance. The Levite woman's daughter may be placed to agonize over the possible tragedy. Moreover, if she is unwilling to rescue the child, the story puts into starker relief

The royal daughter arrives at the Nile to bathe. The text introduces her as one in motion: “and she came down” (וַתֵּרֶד). The spatial conflict of Exod 1 is here replayed. The *risen* Pharaoh of the prior scenes did all he could to *cast down* the Israelite masses. The daughter’s literal coming down to the shore is also a figurative coming down. She descends to meet the Hebrew child on his humble social plane. Because Exod 1 so strongly recapitulates Gen 11, the reader may surmise that the daughter’s coming down also replays God’s coming down to disorient the Babel group. In that instance God came low to preserve human identity for all of its heterogeneity. So now Pharaoh’s daughter comes down to rescue a child, nuance his identity, and begin a narrative trajectory in which this child will embody the same kind of heterogeneity resisted by those of the Babel story and celebrated by God.

Because the tale develops as it does, the “coming down” of the princess takes on deeper significance. By it she incarnates the crossing of territorial and social boundaries. An allusion to divine activity is difficult to overlook. YHWH also shares in these kinds of coming down events. As the daughter comes down to save, so YHWH will do likewise in the remainder of the Exodus story (see 3:8; 19:11, 18, 20; 34:5; see further Gen 11:5, 7; 18:21; Num 11:17, 25; 12:5; 2 Sam 22:10; Isa 31:4; 64:1; Neh 9:13; Ps 18:9; 144:5). What is more, the princess’s salvific drawing *up* of “Moses” contrasts the fiendish rising of the Babel tale. That story featured *upward* construction culminating in a tower that would reach high into the heavens (Gen 11:4). In an effort to segregate, the builders of Babel strain toward isolationism. The ascending Moses mimes the rise of the tower, but to opposite aims. To be taken up from the water will mean for the child that he will carry traces of two, and eventually three, people. As in the judgment that eventually ensues for Babel, Moses will come to personify identity as multiplicity.

Like the Levite mother’s seeing (v. 2), Pharaoh’s daughter is also perceptive (vv. 5–6). The narrator’s retelling relays a two-fold viewing action. The princess is the first to spot the basket (v. 5). She then sees the baby (v. 6). This final observation of the child is accentuated by way of the הנה interjection. The implication is that she is startled to find a crying baby. The child’s experience of floating gives way to tears. The narrator grants a glimpse into the princess’s emotional response. Everything in the unit points to this pivotal moment of discovery. Siebert-Hommes counts 141 words in the pericope with the central

the hope-filled appearance of the story’s third daughter. However, the sister seems to materialize quite quickly to begin negotiations. The matter is perhaps best left open and ancillary to the story. The point is that the child’s existence is imperiled and those involved in his care are in need of a solution.

word of the chiasmic unit being “child.”¹⁶⁹ Pharaoh’s daughter takes pity/shows compassion/spares (חַמַּל) the child the moment she recognizes it is weeping and therefore in distress.¹⁷⁰ Her motivation, unlike that of the midwives (fear of God), is pity/compassion. Less fearful of Pharaoh, and less at risk than the midwives, she needs only pity to move her.¹⁷¹

Against the fear and dread of the wider Egyptian population, the daughter responds with compassion.¹⁷² The daughter of Pharaoh then moves from emotion to deductive logic. A deeper perceptiveness emerges. Able to discern the situation, she speaks. Rightly exegeting the origins of the salvific plan, she declares that the child’s survival is the result of Hebrew ingenuity. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she states (2:6). Like her father, she shows herself to be insightful. But unlike him, who could only see the increase as potential danger, her vision is imbued with kindness. Looking into the water of the Nile, the king’s daughter is struck by the humanity of the subaltern plot. Both the collective plight of the Israelites and the steely determination of an anonymous mother move her. In her compassionate gaze the collective decree that “all (Pharaoh’s) people” would be enjoined as killers (1:22) is rejected.

Having witnessed the encounter, the child’s sister swiftly appears. The narrative says nothing of her ability to somehow foil the attending maids (v. 5). Instantaneously, her voice secures an impromptu audience with the princess. Even her existence critiques Pharaoh. Had he decided on the death of Hebrew daughters, one of them would not be currently scheming against him.¹⁷³ The child’s sister speaks out of turn. Unlike the midwives (1:19), the sister does not wait to be addressed. Spying an opportunity to interject, she takes it boldly. Just beneath the veneer of the sister’s question, a subtle manipulation is at work. As in Exod 1, a ruse is being attempted.¹⁷⁴

169 Siebert-Hommes, “But If She Be a Daughter,” 71. For a similar version see Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 71, 119. Still another version of the unit’s narrative symmetry can be found in Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 99.

170 Cassuto explains how the pronominal suffix with “and she saw (it)” represents the royal daughter’s first identification of the babe, which the text clarifies with יֶלֶד (child) in the next clause. The use of הִנֵּה that immediately follows indicates that her attention is piqued by the child’s crying. It is the crying that arouses compassion. *A Commentary*, 19. Propp, citing Rashbam, notices that the references to the baby are first יֶלֶד and then נֶעֱר. The former is more general, the latter more gender-specific. *Exodus 1–18*, 151.

171 Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 41.

172 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 99–100.

173 Ibid., 114.

174 Given her insightfulness, it seems most likely that Pharaoh’s daughter is a knowing accom-

As with the midwives, what follows is courageous speech. The abused continue to grow, not only in numbers, but also in boldness. However, what is now uttered is less disguised. The words spoken by the Hebrew girl do not only resist, they also guide the thinking of those in power. Unlike the midwives, who were dismissed by the counter-action of Pharaoh (1:22), now the Hebrew girl speaks words that help to craft state policy even if on a small scale. The sister authors a question in which very little space for rejection exists. It is not a question about whether or not the child will live. She takes the life of the child for granted. The question, "Shall I go and call for you a wet-nurse from among the Hebrews, that she may nurse the child for you?" is an inquiry *for* life.

The sister's question is also highly pragmatic. The girl inquires if she is to do the task she herself is proposing. That is, the question not only pronounces the survival of the child, but it also suggests a plan to safeguard the life of the child. The sister imparts personal dimensions by her double repetition "for you" (v. 7), which suggests that her offer to procure a nursemaid is meant only to benefit the princess.¹⁷⁵ The double use of the second person pronoun serves to tie the crying infant with the royal daughter. It helps to create a connection between the anonymous Hebrew child and the powerful Egyptian woman. Indeed, the question respects the exalted status of the princess while also making her the responsible party.

The pronouns place an ethical demand on Pharaoh's daughter. The question of the child's care infiltrates her personal space. The child's sister, perhaps sensing the princess's emotional openness, prods her to decide. Will she make personal the maniacal plan of her father? Will she pronounce a death sentence in the face of an inquiry for life? In this pivotal moment she is confronted with the existence of the Other, embodied in both baby and girl. She is made to choose.

Pharaoh's daughter replies with similar boldness. Her decisive response comes swiftly. With one word she sets the plan in motion. Her imperative instruction "Go!" like the presence of her entourage (v. 5), accentuates her prestige, power, and status (v. 8).¹⁷⁶ As with Pharaoh's summons for the midwives (1:17) and his deadly declaration (1:22), the royal daughter speaks with author-

plie. So Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 18–19. Oswalt, "Exodus," 297. Oswalt observes that she seems all too eager to enter into this "loving conspiracy." 297. After all, she has already made sense of the baby's origin with no outside assistance. She is certainly capable of deducing the connectedness of the youngster and baby.

¹⁷⁵ Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 20.

¹⁷⁶ Sarna adds that her ability to execute the adoption contract speaks to the high social, legal, economic, and property rights status of Egyptian women. *Exodus*, 10. *Exploring Exodus*, 31.

ity. However, Pharaoh's daughter uses her power to work against her father. With her single word she unravels her father's intricate rhetoric.¹⁷⁷ In the verse that follows, the emphatic "even I" of the compensation clause (v. 9c) suggests yet another contrast. While her father ushers in exploitative tactics to exact increasingly more product from the client people, the daughter broaches the subject of compensation for the wet nurse. Unsolicited, she offers to pay the woman for her services. The princess, without Pharaoh's sanction, funds the child's care (NJB, NEB).¹⁷⁸

Like the midwives speaking in the ameliorative language of Pharaoh's racist belief system, so too the princess is contextualizing *her* message for her audience. To secure the child's survival she will need to speak the language of status. Perhaps her seeming terseness¹⁷⁹ is itself a life-preserving tactic. Accordingly, Andrés Glaze argues for a double meaning in the brief and simple words of the dialogue. In one direction, the brevity is meant for the attendants in order not to arouse suspicion. She must be convincing to those who are well-accustomed with the circles of power in which she operates. The vast chasm of power and privilege separating both daughters must be upheld for the sake of appearances. For the princess to appear unduly sentimental may erode the power disparity she and those around her are accustomed to. As a subtext, however, the exchange is among women who understand the high stakes of which they speak.¹⁸⁰ The princess's display of exorbitant tenderness may, paradoxically, jeopardize the plan for the child's salvation. If her hurried adoption carries with it the features of her power, she may succeed in the end.

Moreover, the princess's willingness to play along with the sister's attempt at a ruse, and the princess's unwillingness to out her and her mother as the plot's implementers, may indicate her care to protect them from possible punishment. Thus, the discretion shown by Pharaoh's daughter may also be a strategy for maintaining the child's welfare¹⁸¹ along with the dignity of his family.

177 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 114.

178 Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 35.

179 Ackerman considers the royal daughter an adversarial figure. Not only is she unnamed, like her father, but her imperative "Go!" (הֵלֵכִי) and her emphatic "even I" (וְאֲנִי אִתִּי) of verse 9 reveals her extreme sense of authority which spills into condescension and pride. She expects to be celebrated by the slave community but cannot detect that she has been misled. "The Moses Birth Story," 93–94. Propp disagrees, reasoning that the reuse of the verb in Hebrew to answer in the affirmative is a common practice. *Exodus 1–18*, 151. So also Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 35.

180 Andrés Glaze, *Exodo* (CBMH; El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1994), 55.

181 Greenberg perceives that, in light of Hebrew-Egyptian animosity in Genesis and Exod 1,

The mother/wet nurse agrees to the suggestion of the princess. The biological mother is given her child. The text reports that she takes (לקח) him. Unlike the taking of the box (v. 3), this time the “taking” is an act done without fear of death. This is a joy-filled taking.¹⁸² Not only is a child taken, but so too is a new positionality. The appointment to serve as wet nurse puts the Levite mother in the midwives’ space, at once part of, but separate from, the empire.

More irony and power is reserved for verse 9 where the agreement is recorded. The payment for the preservation of Hebrew life will come from Pharaoh’s own coffers. The expense incurred by the campaign of infanticide is countered by the economic entanglement posed by the inclusion of the child. The one who called for the execution of Hebrew infants now becomes “grandfather” to one of them. Indeed, without the Pharaoh’s order, this child would have never found himself in Pharaoh’s court.¹⁸³ Israelite fertility cannot be contained. It spills over even into the life of those in Pharaoh’s sphere. His exclusionist Babel-like plan is finally stymied, not only by underclass midwives, but also by a member of his house. The incongruity of the episode cannot be overlooked. The dreaded Other is now among his very family.

The murderous rhetoric of Pharaoh is challenged and transformed by the appearance of his daughter. Pharaoh believes in the reshaping of humanity, but only insofar as that reshaping crafts individuals and groups in ways that fit his conception of human personality as Egyptian. Pharaoh believes in unidirectional identity in which those who matter must fit state goals. Human personality is fluid but cannot remain as such. It must ultimately calcify into Egyptian exclusivity. Pharaoh’s daughter also believes in pliability, but her version is willing to move away from the power of her birthright toward the middle. She is a more complicated figure. She embodies contrapuntal existence insofar as she combats the stereotype of empire as flatly evil.

The daughter’s willingness to humanize the Hebrew Other begins a reappraisal of human identity that will play out in the approaching stories of Midianite kindness. At the moment, however, it is difficult to overlook her example. While her father tries to pull the Other into his diabolical empire scheme, she, as a personification of empire in her own right, moves toward the Other in a way that makes her into an Other herself.

The princess’s arrival sensitizes the reader by further problematizing simplistic categories already rejected in Exod 1. She defies the urge to bifurcate the

perhaps giving the baby to an Egyptian wet-nurse may have resulted in harsh treatment. *Understanding Exodus*, 41–42.

182 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 20.

183 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:267.

text of Exodus into benevolent and malevolent extremes in which the Other is the locus for humanity, dignity, and inclusiveness on the one hand, while imperial agents are for domination, estrangement, and expulsion on the other. In Pharaoh's daughter, Exodus is offering a more complex picture. She humanizes the once cold and sterile power.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps the text knows what Aimé Césaire would later make explicit: colonialism entails a "boomerang effect" that threatens to decivilize, brutalize, and make savage even the oppressor class.¹⁸⁵

By diverting from the acquiescing Egyptian population of 1:9–12, the princess teaches that even non-Israelites can be included into God's plans. In her example, we see also that even those in positions of power can serve as "allies of life,"¹⁸⁶ working with the powerless to resist from within. According to Eleazar Fernandez, scholarly critiques must give way to "the articulation of other narratives of liberation, for the God of liberation is not just the liberator of one 'elect' people."¹⁸⁷ Pharaoh's daughter may well qualify under such a rubric. In this episode she, the non-elect, begins to affect her own kind of rescue, one might say, her own kind of liberation.

"Moses" as Linguistic Hybridization

In antiquity, high infant mortality rates meant that adopted children were seldom brought under the care of adoptive parents, nor named, until the conclusion of the weaning period.¹⁸⁸ Once weaned and therefore deemed viable, the child in the Exodus narrative is ready for a name. The text reports that the princess not the mother/wet nurse provides the name. The act of naming achieves multiple ends. Thematically, it closes the unit begun with the conception clause of verse 2. There we expected the name to be given, but the text keeps us in suspense until the daughter has secured the baby's safety.¹⁸⁹ The giving of the name is rhetorically effective. Commentators regularly note that the omissions of all personal names in the unit, including the name of

184 Against this see Dube, who by virtue of the fact that Moses is returned to his mother, deduces an emotional distance in Pharaoh's daughter. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 76.

185 Césaire, *Discourse*, 35–36, 41.

186 Pixley, *On Exodus*, 7.

187 Eleazar S. Fernandez, "Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans' Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 243.

188 Sarna, *Exodus*, 10.

189 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 154. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 68.

the child's sister, along with those of Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants, is meant to highlight the naming of Moses in verse 10.¹⁹⁰

Another possible explanation for the lack of names may relate to the omission of Pharaoh's name in the previous chapter. It may be that if Exod 1 leaves Pharaoh unnamed in order to accentuate the paradigmatic timelessness of oppressive practices, so too Exod 2:1–10 leaves the benevolent women nameless in order to set in relief the perennial nature of all who show similar kindnesses. Thus the non-naming of the daughter is not to disparage her like her father, but perhaps is intended to make her a timeless representation for all people in all places who stand for righteousness.

There is no shortage of etymological discussion surrounding the daughter's selection of "Moses" for a name. Primarily, it reflects a typical theophoric Egyptian name derived from either *ms(w)* "to beget/be born" or *mesu* meaning "child, son" and ordinarily ascribed to monarchs such as Thut-mose and Ah-mose.¹⁹¹ Following the Egyptian etymology, the princess considered the child a son and named him as such. The form of the name, however, does not fit the daughter's explanation of its meaning (v. 10). The reader would expect the name to reflect the passive participle of the explanation, "one who is drawn out." However "Moses" takes on the form of the active participle, "one who draws out." Various explanations have been proposed for solving this puzzling feature.

For most scholars, the incongruity of the name and explanation is likely the work of the narrator who either records a folk etymology¹⁹² or fabricates the etymology of what is in fact an Egyptian name by making it into a Hebrew pun.¹⁹³ Others postulate that the double etymologies are the result of opposing writers.¹⁹⁴ Or alternatively, the narrator is possibly harmonizing Egyptian and Hebrew traditions, perhaps by imputing to Pharaoh's daughter a knowledge of Hebrew.¹⁹⁵ Still others infer that the narrator is mocking the princess for her

190 Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter," 67; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 37; Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 146; Fox, *Now These Are the Names*, 15; Meyers, *Exodus*, 42; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:271.

191 Against Egyptian provenance see Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 216–217.

192 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 20. Enns, *Exodus*, 64.

193 On the topic of punning biblical names see G.R. Driver, "Playing on Words," *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Papers* (Jerusalem, 1967), 124.

194 See Burke O. Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative in the Old Testament* (BZAW 108; Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1968), 5–10.

195 Cole, *Exodus*, 58–59. Given the cultural mix of the Nile Delta, Gordon is open to the pos-

rather clumsy grasp of a foreign language. While she intends to make Moses into a passive character, her faulty Hebrew actually ascribes to him active dimensions, which will come to pass in the future.¹⁹⁶ Thus she unwittingly speaks of future episodes that will result in the death of her fellow Egyptians.

These explanations fail in two areas. First, they assume that Hebrew name explanations are intended by their ancient authors to be etymologically precise.¹⁹⁷ Incompatibility between the linguistic realities of names and their elucidations is a well-known phenomenon of Hebrew literature. Second, while some explanations emphasize the ways in which “Moses” serves the plot, the focus rests exclusively on the future. The princess’s naming is an act of unwitting foreshadowing. Commentators are quick to point out that the name is evidence of a future episode in which “Moses” will himself draw out. The naming at his infancy foretells of his ultimate salvific role at the Sea of Reeds. The name is made into a promise of a future deliverance.

But racing too quickly to that climactic future event, or treating the Egyptian nature of the name as merely a starting point, is to divest the text of an important aim already begun in chapter 1, and so, of another viable possibility. Can it be that the addition of a Hebrew etymology via the narrator’s explanation is more than clever word-play which looks to the future? Can the explanation serve as an attempt to accentuate the topic of identity in which chapter 1 is so heavily invested? Given the previous narrative, the narrator’s note in 2:10 may be seeking to enhance the important counter-cultural actions of Pharaoh’s daughter by allying with her to advance the overarching point of the entire unit: identity as a hybrid reality.

The disjointed name and explanation is allowed to remain in the text, but not to mock or lampoon the daughter. Ridicule of the princess¹⁹⁸ seems an

sibility that the princess could have in fact been familiar with Semitic dialects. Robert P. Gordon, “Exodus” in *New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1979), 156.

196 See Ackerman, “The Moses Birth Story,” 94–95. Similarly, Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 33. Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:289.

197 On the stylistic nature of literary etymology over and against the precision of scholarly etymology see Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:72–73.

198 For example, Sarna sees her as unwittingly thwarting her father’s plan. *Exodus*, 10. See further Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 28. Propp sees her as being tricked into the hiring of her own mother as paid wet-nurse. *Exodus 1–18*, 154. Similarly, G. Henton Davies, *Exodus* (TBC; London: SCM Press, 1967), 64. John I. Durham, *Understanding the Basic Themes of Exodus* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 15. Cole, *Exodus*, 58. Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 62. Meyer considers the episode as comedic. Pharaoh’s daughter is ridiculed by the text. *The Message of Exodus*, 37.

unlikely turn given the text's depiction of her as demonstrating overwhelming sympathy for the Hebrew child.¹⁹⁹ Can it be that her haphazard definition for "Moses" sets in relief her own multi-stanced, variegated position? Viewed in more positive terms, the narrative reports that the daughter is playfully creolizing the Egyptian term with Hebrew etymology for the verb מִשָּׁה (to draw) to make a point about the baby's identity and her own as being found in the midst of tension. Davies comes closest to such a notion, proposing that the confusion between active and passive participles "suggests the ambivalence in which Moses will now live."²⁰⁰ The linguistic tension for the mis-identification is a working out of the sociological mis-identification embodied in the existence of a Hebrew child alive in Pharaoh's court.

The tension of the misplaced child also embodies the implications that now arise in the life of the daughter. In this instance the name is not only the defining feature of the baby's future life. Nor is it to simply convey his birth story and Hebrew origins.²⁰¹ The name also comes to define the princess's present life. The naming, name, and elucidation of the name illustrate the taut social and political position of the adoptive parent and adopted son. The episode simultaneously de-centers and unifies the pair. The naming event places both of them between Hebraic and Egyptian hyper-nationalistic extremes. They enter the contact zone.

The child's diglossic name signals his double identity, as both Egyptian and Hebrew, and embodies the multiplicities already introduced by the midwives. In the naming, the Israelite group once collectivized by Pharaoh, is granted an identity.²⁰² That identity is not solely that of the Hebrew clan. Nor is it that of their Egyptian overlords. The daughter's intent is not to create an Egyptian.²⁰³ The linguistic hybridization created by the name and Hebraized by her explanation indicates that she does not wish to strip the child of either his ethnic identity or his emerging social one. Putting the young child in the care of his mother may intimate a desire to connect Moses with his ethnic roots. As the child's biological mother gives him life, so too does his adoptive

199 Additionally, Childs suggests that the birth narrative resembles wisdom tales historicized. So, he argues, the daughter does not adopt the child out of ignorance, or because she is deceived. She does so because, coinciding with the international ethos of wisdom tales, she feels genuine affection for the foreign child. *The Book of Exodus*, 13. See further his "The Birth of Moses," 110–118.

200 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 115.

201 Andíñach, *Éxodo*, 46.

202 Wicke, "The Literary Structure," 100.

203 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 35.

mother.²⁰⁴ The name “Moses” maintains and affirms his origins while also tying him firmly to his Egyptian status. As a name most comfortable in the hyphenated space, “Moses” is an embodiment of diverging social and political realities.

The daughter’s act of naming similarly evokes the phenomena of interlanguage and syntactic fusion found in postcolonial literatures. The former is “the fusion of the linguistic structures of two languages.”²⁰⁵ The latter takes shape in multilingual societies to adapt linguistic differences by upholding tension, often through the creation of neologisms.²⁰⁶ Vernacularisms are joined with dominant linguistic norms to capture and recapture agency by overwriting and overriding them. “Moses,” as a locution of interlanguage, represents the strain he will feel in what follows (2:11–22). From the outset, Moses is a jumble of disparate elements. Gordon F. Davies summarizes, “He is nursed by his mother, named by the princess; he is adopted by the second but not abandoned by the first. His future is mysterious because he is still passive.”²⁰⁷

The actions of Pharaoh’s daughter not only create an avenue in which Moses’ complex identity will flourish, they also give rise to a complex identity of her own. Like Shiprah and Puah, Pharaoh’s daughter charts her own third way. Perhaps like them and the mother/wet nurse she hires, this colonizing agent is herself inspired to institute her own brand of loophole defiance.²⁰⁸ While Pharaoh of course implies that Hebrew boys are to perish in 1:22, the plan says nothing about the possibility that babies might be rescued once they have already been thrown in.²⁰⁹ The daughter’s naming of the child is a blatant affront to the pharaonic decree. It indicates that she does not share her father’s dichotomizing politics.

The daughter’s behavior carries implications for the natural setting as well. While Pharaoh calls on his people to fling boys into the Nile, the royal daughter draws one of them out. The Nile as a place of death is reversed. The work of all three daughters, in fact, reclaims the Nile. The river is transformed back into a setting of life as worshipped by Egyptians.²¹⁰ The actions of the women salvage

204 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 22.

205 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 65.

206 Ibid., 68. For examples of both interlanguage and syntactic fusion, see 65–68.

207 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 96.

208 For a dynamic interpretation of the Exod 1–2 narrative that employs the performing arts see Cressy John et al., “An Asian Feminist Perspective: The Exodus Story (Exodus 1:8–22; 2:1–10),” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (3d ed.; ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), 217–226.

209 Ibid., 225.

210 Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., “River,” *DBI* 729–731. In a related matter, 14:30 reports

Egypt's relationship with the natural order. For now the Nile returns to a place of hope and possibility. It is a place where life flourishes. As J. Gerald Janzen reasons, the Nile is even an ally of life, for it "joins the Hebrew midwives, Moses' mother and sister, and even Pharaoh's own daughter in defeating his aims."²¹¹

The fallout of such defiance is that the royal daughter, like the midwives, must now negotiate a new reality in which she is in opposition to the elite power while also being a significant part *of* that elite power. Her pronouncement that the child will live is in direct violation of her father's wishes. Unexpectedly, she dissents from the very structure that has afforded her power and privilege. However, unlike the midwives who are involved with imperial power at the level of employee-employer relations, she is more deeply entrenched. She belongs both to the tradition of life-protectors (midwives) *and* to that of the life-takers (Egypt). She fits uneasily as an Egyptian and cannot be co-opted as Israelite. Characterizing her, and groups in general, on the basis of group affiliation is unproductive; she belongs partially to both.²¹²

Conclusion

Brown summarizes Exod 1 as the "classic oppressor/oppressed situation, complete with intimidation, humiliation, forced labor, powerlessness, and genocide."²¹³ The rigidity of this appraisal is evocative of the postcolonial assessments outlined in the last chapter. While the content presents unmistakably polarizing tendencies, I have shown that Exod 1's deeper complexity is found in the interplay between rigid and fluid conceptions of what counts as authentic identity.

Perched on one extreme is the empire with its unbending notions of human worth. For Egypt, identity is an objective reality to be demarcated homogeneously for the sake of state goals.²¹⁴ For Pharaoh, genuine identity is a matter of cultural supremacy in which difference is used as pretense for exploitation and murder. Xenophobic and discriminatory, this is the politics of fear in which only

that the Egyptian attackers lay dead on the shore by using the same word in the current story (שָׁפַת). The death of the Egyptian military on the shore is a fitting end to Egypt's extermination plan on the Nile shore. They receive their comeuppance.

211 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 20.

212 *Ibid.*, 22.

213 Brown, *Unexpected News*, 36.

214 Goldberg traces a similar phenomenon occurring in twentieth century Europe. See "Heterogeneity and Hybridity," 72–86.

Egyptians, and those who bend to Egyptian norms, matter. Only when made to fit Egyptian cultural conventions through coercive assimilation and the taking of sides can identity count as valid.

Through the words and actions of the midwives, the chapter accomplishes the task of reclaiming human existence from the monolithic manacles of Egyptian-style ethnocentricity, for the purpose of championing multiplicity and heterogeneity as requisite elements comprising authentic human existence. Against Pharaoh's stubbornness, the midwives, Levite mother, Levite daughter, and royal daughter, follow Joseph's example by mediating between extremes to recast identity as something under negotiation. They thwart Pharaoh's attempts to make them into his mold. They will live out their ambivalence—by which I mean their hybridity—effectively oscillating between the extremes of subverting colonial power, on the one hand, and acquiescing to colonial power, on the other.

The royal daughter reaches the same liminal space occupied by the midwives but from a position of socio-political power. In spite of this significant variance, both stories undergird the same fundamental point: authentic identity is in flux, existing in the hybrid space between rigid poles. Faithful identity depends on its willingness to be reorganized and refashioned. As Francisco Lozada has defined the operative term, "identity is not understood as immutable, fixed, or primordial, but rather as self-making or constantly reconstructing at different times and different places."²¹⁵ To create identity is to enter into a variegated endeavor, not a nationalistic or jingoistic one. This flexibility does not mean that ethnic or cultural differences are abolished. It means, rather, that difference is not the endgame of human identity. Irreducibly synergistic, "identity itself is the function of a network of differences rather than an essence."²¹⁶ It is never beholden to a singularity but is always multiple. As Dube comparably remarks, "Hybridity becomes a form of resistance, for it dispenses with dualistic and hierarchical constructions of cultures, which are used to claim the superiority of colonizing cultures, and shows that cultures grow and are dependent on borrowing from each other."²¹⁷

215 Francisco Lozada, Jr., "Identity," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (ed. A.K.M. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 113–114.

216 Bill Ashcroft, "Constitutive Graphonomy," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin; London: Routledge, 1995), 299.

217 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 51.

Identity Destruction: Moses' Quadruple Displacement (Exodus 2:11–22)

Introduction

It is customary for exegetes to comment on Moses' sense of identity in Exod 2. Interpretive outcomes relay his self-identification as Egyptian, Hebrew, or Midianite. Moses is either championing his erstwhile Egyptian/Hebrew roots or rejoicing in his newer Midianite ones. The desert is a transitional place where Moses is free to sort out his identity.¹ It is also routine to cast his time in Midian as preparatory to an imminent encounter with the commissioning YHWH.² In Midian, his response to injustice is indicative of grander tasks to follow. Moses' desert experience anticipates future thematic and plot developments in which he is divinely legitimized and returns to Egypt in order to carry out YHWH's liberative plan. Indifference does not suit the hero of traditional interpretation. In these exegeses, Moses is empathetic and courageous. He stands ready to receive his calling. Moses comes of age.³

While these themes are present, the current chapter argues that they are hardly primary. The discussion that follows sees the narrative of Exod 2 as going beyond the establishment of Moses' preparation or training. Rather, it sketches Midian as a place of personal devastation and hopelessness. The passage must be understood for the ways in which it foregrounds an acute disorientation within the psyche of Moses. A fuller postcolonial reading (explored principally through the foundational work of Frantz Fanon) will assist in unlocking and appreciating the intricacies of the crisis he encounters. For it is here that Moses suffers his most profound undoing, unraveling, and incompatibility.

1 Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 64.

2 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 43; Durham, *Exodus*, 24; John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus* (2d ed.; Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1986), 65; Charles R. Erdman, *The Book of Exodus: An Exposition* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1949), 26–27; Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (PWS; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 71–72; Meyer, *Exodus*, 42–43; Kaiser, "Exodus," 318.

3 The emphasis on maturation is especially true of Bryna Jocheved Levy, "Moshe: Portrait of the Leader as a Young Man," in *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts* (ed. Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman; New York: Urim, 2000), 398–429.

Identity in Crisis: Moses' Failure to Embody Plurality (Exodus 2:11–15a)

2:11 And it came to pass in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew man, one of his brethren. 12 And he turned this way and that, and he saw no one. So he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the second day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting. So he said to the guilty one "Why do you strike your companion?" 14 He answered, "Who set you as chief and judge over us? Are you thinking to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." 15 When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

Exod 2:11–15a

Moses' Conflicted Subconscious

With the first scene of chapter 2 complete (2:1–10) the shorter second episode (2:11–15a) opens some years later. Moses is grown. The note about his going out "to" indicates that he continues to benefit from the privileges furnished by his adoptive royal lineage. Moses moves about the land freely, from stately residence to worksite.⁴ The story is evocative of a familiar folkloric model in which the prince ventures beyond the luxury of the palace to experience common life and undergoes subsequent enlightenment, though the Moses tale differs substantially.⁵ In verse 11, the reader also learns that the independence of his unencumbered existence does not make him immune to the spectacle of imperial mistreatment. He sees.

What Moses witnesses is not mere toil. He observes the hard labor of oppressive work. The word used, *בסבלתם*, from the nominal *סבלה* (burden), appears in 1:11. There it denoted the abusive nature of Pharaoh's labor gangs. In 2:11, the word suggests that the striker is no mere Egyptian,⁶ but one of the taskmasters.⁷

4 Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 38.

5 See Propp for parallels with Siddhartha and Gilgamesh stories. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 165–166. See further the Egyptian tale of Sinuhe.

6 So Murphy, *Exodus*, 29.

7 This seems the clearest interpretation though it remains a possibility that the omission of "taskmaster" to identify the tormenter of 2:11 is intentional. Is it possible that the current episode reiterates the efficiency of Pharaoh's comprehensive plan (1:22) by suggesting that even those disconnected from the work of labor administration have begun to inflict suffering? If so, then Pharaoh has accomplished his task. All of Egypt is working together to carry out Israelite humiliation.

The reuse of the word implies that the oppressive treatment of the people, seen in Exod 1, is happening afresh. The empire's sordid agenda of chapter 1 lives on in the sustained maltreatment of the "Hebrew" underclass.⁸

The combination of סבלה with the *bet* preposition connotes the idea of looking "on" or "upon" (וירא בסבלתם). The act of seeing is not merely that of recognition or noticing. Moses does not see innocuously. The word combination implies a more careful scrutiny that elicits emotional investment and response. Meyer suggests that the watchful Moses is looking on the burdens of the Israelite laborers, which connotes more than an "objective and dispassionate glance."⁹ In light of prior narrative material, parallels become clear. Moses looks twice in verse 11, which is in symmetry to the attentive quality of his biological and adoptive mothers (vv. 2, 5, 6). As they both took pity and felt compassion, so now he also feels compassion.¹⁰ Like his mothers, Moses sees and discerns the shape of suffering. Like them, he is moved to action.

The compassion Moses feels is uniquely placed on the people of his origin. The text is silent on the topic of Moses' knowledge of a prior rescue. Nevertheless, verse 11 is careful to twice indicate the critical data by way of the repeated possessive pronoun. The narrator reports that while out Moses witnesses the labor of "his brethren/relatives" (אחיו). In the clause which follows (ויד), the victim is numbered among his kinsmen with the use of the same word (מאחיו). Despite living under the care of Egypt, Moses is not unaware of his ethnic origins. His adoptive mother has not kept from him this vital information. One might additionally deduce that if he knows the Hebrew labor force, they too know of him.¹¹ The repetition of the possessive pronoun conveys Moses' fidelity to his Israelite kinsmen. It indicates that Moses valorizes his Hebrew origins.

Vigorous discussion among commentators surrounds the pivotal moment that thrusts Moses into action. His precise rationale for acting remains in ques-

8 Pixley notices the use of "Hebrew" and postulates that it reappears to signify the theme of class struggle. Pixley, *On Exodus*, 8.

9 Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 38; So also Gispén, *Exodus*, 43; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 30; Cole, *Exodus*, 59; Sarna, *Exodus*, 239.

10 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 22.

11 For a departure from this mainstream interpretation, see Enns, who argues that the identification of "his brethren" may emanate from the mind of the author and not Moses. For Enns, it would have been unlikely for Moses to know his true heritage, given that such knowledge would endanger him. Moses, therefore, may be acting as an Egyptian sympathizer, not as a self-aware Hebrew. See Enns, *Exodus*, 78–79. A fuller argument can be found in Ernest Neufeld, "The Redemption of Moses," *Judaism* 42 (1993): 50–58. However, the more conventional reading is preferred in light of Moses' running (v. 15). See discussion below.

tion. For most scholars, the turning to look “this way and that” signals calculating and intentionally clandestine behavior. Before eliminating the Egyptian abuser, Moses cares to identify witnesses. To kill in secret, he looks to determine that no one sees.¹² Others, following the Hebrew’s literal “there was no person,” read the looking around as a search for *authorized* assistance. Parallel texts make this an attractive possibility (see Isa 41:28; 50:2; 59:15–16; 63:5; Judg 12:3; 2 Sam 22:42). The abuser is, therefore, not authorized to inflict a beating. He is simply an ordinary Egyptian, not a taskmaster.¹³ Moses is forced to act in the vacuum created by the absence of a legitimate figure. This reading recalls Pharaoh’s all-inclusive program (1:22). It would seem that even average Egyptians have joined the oppressor group. Pharaoh succeeds in turning all of Egypt against the Hebrews. Still other scholars leave the matter open to either reading.¹⁴

In any case, the act is spontaneous and premeditated. Moses reacts in light of what he witnesses and makes the conscious choice to embroil himself in the drama. Whether he acts furtively, or in reaction to the absence of a proper official, the act remains entirely his. Moses’ behavior is at once careful and impulsive. He does not dig a pit for the murdered Egyptian. He merely conceals the body with sand. The tension created by both acts, ordered looking (for witnesses or intervener) versus disorderly corpse disposal, emphasizes a developing conflict beginning to materialize in Moses.

The use of נכה in both abuse episodes (vv. 11 and 12) may hint at future legislation detailing retributive punishment (*lex talionis*)¹⁵ and/or foreshadow the use of the word for the coming plague narrative (lit. “smittings”).¹⁶ In the immediate context, it indicates that Moses reuses the abuse of the Egyptian by turning it on him (see 5:14, 16). The Egyptian gets his comeuppance. The power wielded by Egypt is turned against Egypt.¹⁷ Additionally, while נכה is usually conveyed as “smite/strike/beat,” the use of the word for Moses’ killing may indicate that the Egyptian strikes the Hebrew with the intent to kill him,

12 So Dozeman, *Exodus*, 87; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 163; Gispén, *Exodus*, 43; Rylaarsdam, “The Book of Exodus (exegesis),” 863; Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 9; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 30; Erdman, *Exodus*, 25.

13 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 32. Jacob, *The Second Book*, 37–38. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 45.

14 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 22; Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 38; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:298–299. A synopsis of interpretive strategies can be found in Dozeman, *Exodus*, 88–89.

15 See Exod 21:12, 15, 18–20, 26.

16 See Exod 3:20; 7:17, 20, 25; 8:16, 17; 9:15, 25, 31–32; 12:12–13, 29; 17:5.

17 Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 702.

or in a way that would result in his death. Alternatively, the point may be that Moses is overreacting. While he meant to beat the Egyptian, he is surprised that a beating ends in death.

The issue of Mosaic identity once again becomes relevant in these initial verses. Some scholars stress that the violence episode intends to present Moses as sharply choosing his ethnic people over his adoptive context.¹⁸ As in Exod 1, they argue, the abuse occurs between polar opposites, an Egyptian and a Hebrew. The text establishes discrepant identities to then place Moses firmly on the side of the underclass. As in the mind of Pharaoh, there are insiders and there are outsiders. Against Pharaoh, Moses chooses the side of outsiders.¹⁹ Still others go beyond to accent the narrative with a sense of romantic triumphalism that styles Moses as a self-aware architect of justice.²⁰ For both groups, Moses' impulsiveness is recast in positive terms. Moses shows himself to be decisive and dynamic, passionate and courageous. The point of the passage is to present Moses as staunchly committed to his Israelite heritage and imbued with the raw material of high-minded morality to be later honed by the sovereign YHWH.

Attractive as these characterizations are, they tend to oversimplify Mosaic identity by ignoring the incongruous nature of his actions and failing to see the text as sharply derisive of his behavior, not congratulatory of it. While he indeed thinks of himself as joining with the Hebrew labor force against Egyptian oppression, Exod 1 resisted such an appraisal of Pharaoh's static identity. Perhaps, then, the doubled pronoun of verse 11 serves as a criticism of Moses, insofar as it hints that he himself is demonstrating a Pharaoh-like rigidity. In light of 1:1–2:10, the kingroup fidelity that Moses senses is not to be celebrated. Devotion to *one* people means forfeiting the liminal qualities modeled by the women of the narrative.

In the act of killing the Egyptian, multiple ironies are at work. For one, Moses, like his adoptive grandfather, reasons in the familiar language of empire

18 So Bush, *Notes*, 29–30; Calvin, *Commentaries*, 46–48; Levy surmises, “As he killed the Egyptian assailant, Moshe killed the Egyptian within himself.” “Moshe,” 417.

19 See Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 702; See further, Meyers, *Exodus*, 44; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 41; Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:293, 298; Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 34.

20 Some commentators exaggerate Moses' sense of morality, courage, nobility, and justice. See Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 22; Rylaarsdam, “The Book of Exodus (exegesis),” 862, 864; Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 66; Meyer, *Exodus*, 26–28, 41; Oswalt, “Exodus,” 298. Following Fretheim, it is perhaps more appropriate to credit Moses' sense of justice with his time in Egypt. For God's work extends to all reaches of created order, even to the dreaded Egyptians. *Exodus*, 45. If Fretheim is right, then here again is further evidence of a humanized empire.

(v. 12). Moses learns that overreaction, not diplomacy, is an avenue for problem solving. Having witnessed and internalized violence, he now turns to violence, rather than to the protectiveness of his female antecedents. The episode makes clear that Moses is incapable of operating in a fashion other than that which he witnessed in his upbringing. In both Pharaoh and Moses, strict identity politics lead inexorably to aggression. As a murderer he is hardly a hero to be emulated²¹ but is actually allied with the brand of behavior that is at home in empire.

What defines Moses in the scene is the ease with which he exterminates. His willingness to return to the worksite sketches Moses as rather brash and unfazed by the elimination of another. This callousness places him in closer relation to Pharaoh than to Israel. Moses' covert disposal of the Egyptian assailant also parrots Pharaoh. Dozeman recalls how the secretive murder evokes Pharaoh's instructions to the midwives.²² The fact that Moses hides the body reminds the reader of Pharaoh's initial secret plan to hide the deaths of newborns. What the midwives refused to do Moses now accomplishes.

Set in parallel to the hiding of the infant Moses among the reeds, this current hiding is done hastily, without care, without thought. While the midwives and mothers carefully navigated amidst the potential pitfalls and promises of both subaltern and privileged positions, Moses acts coarsely and disproportionately. While the women moved to secure the survival of the vulnerable, the outcome of Moses' behavior is death, not life. He does not yet possess the requisite level of acuity seen in his forerunners. He may surmise that he has shifted alliances, but his actions disclose the truth of the matter. Moses remains firmly tethered to Egyptian reasoning and practices.

Heaping accolades on Moses is heavy-handed at this early hour. A postcolonial reading does not celebrate Moses' connection to Israel, but rather, mourns that Moses' behavior creates estrangement from the work of the women. Unaware of his embroilment with empire, Moses is in need of enlightenment. It will take one of his ethnic own, a Hebrew, to make the point evident in the confrontation scene that follows. As Pharaoh was refuted by the clever reply of the midwives, so now another pair of Hebrews will employ a clever rhetorical flourish to stand together against the Pharaonic Moses. The spokesman's twofold response will reveal the critical data. Moses' fragmentation will soon be exposed.

21 Commenting on v. 22 Brueggemann, goes as far as to draw ecclesiastical connections when stressing, "Whenever the faithful community accepts a role as an intervener for the marginal in order to break cycles of violence, it invariably becomes a community of 'resident aliens.'" *Exodus*, 705.

22 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 87.

Moses' Realized Internal Conflict

The next day Moses again goes out (v. 13).²³ He may be following a predetermined schedule, or perhaps, as Noth maintains, his action is evidence of more determined concern for the Hebrew people.²⁴ As before, Moses' mobility indicates that his privilege remains intact. He moves throughout the land as he pleases. While he associates with his brethren and is aware that they comprise the labor force, he is not forced to join them in the work.²⁵ Despite having chosen to ally himself with the people of his birth (vv. 10–11), Moses seems unwilling to release his hold on his privileged status as a member of the Egyptian high aristocracy. The insertion of הנה between the repeated use of שני (שני, השני) may indicate surprise. In 1:9, הנה was used in Pharaoh's appeal to emotion. In 2:6, it expressed the excitement of Pharaoh's daughter. Now it carries the element of shock.²⁶ Moses' violent solution may have solved the singular threat of Egyptian abuse, but he is amazed to learn that violence cannot dissolve the problem of Hebrew infighting.

As this second confrontation scene opens, Moses is able to discern between right and wrong. Somehow he identifies the offending party and confronts him directly. In his hypocrisy, Moses will attempt to quell violence despite having just exercised it. Realizing that both men share a common lineage, Moses makes his case by appealing to family group loyalty. His rhetorical question "Why do you strike your companion?" indicates the value he places on kinship fidelity. Moses' question confirms what the reader learned in verse 11, that he believes himself a member of the Hebrew community. Moses' act of defense and murder has created in him a deeper sense of connectedness with those of his lineage. His slaying of the Egyptian is evidence of a new boldness.

Moses' question "Why do you strike your companion?" bears contradictory elements. It is already clear that Moses operates with an unconscious fidelity to Egyptian norms. Here again his question, like Pharaoh's question to the midwives (1:18), follows the legal or pre-judicial pattern of *Beschuldigungsformel*. This accusation-question ordinarily includes the interrogative particle followed by the nature of the offense.²⁷ On the one hand, Moses is affirming the

23 Propp notes that the expression can mean "second day," as it can also indicate the following day that the narrative wishes to address. *Exodus* 1–18, 164. My translation retains the flexibility of meaning by opting for the former.

24 Noth, *Exodus*, 36.

25 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 31.

26 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 126.

27 Ibid., 134. Davies makes the point that while the interaction should not be taken as a legal trial, the vocabulary does exist within the range of legal matters. See 133.

value of and necessity for family ties. On the other hand, the mere act of vocalizing such an idea from the position of legal power undermines his attempt at reconciliation. Because he is accustomed to authority and its trappings, Moses adopts Egyptian status and judicial speech to appoint himself as sovereign.

The act of adjudicating a grievance, even if motivated by ethical principles and couched within familial terms, serves to reinscribe his sense of authority and domination.²⁸ The pliability with which Moses operates coincides with Fanon's critique of colonial subtlety. According to Fanon, as a nation approaches liberation, the colonialist bourgeoisie undoubtedly attempt to modify relations by two stratagems. First, the colonialist modifies overt oppressive behavior by adopting more humanizing language, including terms like "Sir" and "Ma'am". These psychological devices stave off hatred because "The colonized subject is so starved of anything that humanizes him, even if it is third rate, that these trivial handouts in some cases manage to impress him."²⁹ So psychologically debilitated is the colonized community that even the smallest gesture engenders a positive reaction. So also, the colonialist infuses a new idea into the dialogue, which is really a new brand of colonial domination, that of nonviolence. Seeing its power slip, colonial control endorses passivity as a new form of control.³⁰

What Moses intends as an ascent to reason and kinship carries with it the residue of his power. As with the use of violence to solve problems, Moses assumes Hebrew identity as his own but uses Egyptian power to implement it. Moses cannot see how his interaction carries with it the hallmarks of his privilege. Neither can he see what is clear to the reader. To advocate for peace as a member of the tyrant class is to remain in the current of despotism. There can be no authenticity in such an act. It will always ring hollow. Although Moses thinks he is speaking authoritatively into the conflict, it is his very authority that makes such an act impossible.

Unaware, Moses is attempting to benefit from both ethnic origin and social entitlement. He is being betrayed by his own naïveté. Moses fails to operate secretively as the Hebrew mothers have done successfully.³¹ Like them and his adoptive mother, Moses attempts to negotiate positive results. However, he lacks the tact to step into the hybridic middle that is demanded. He has yet to perform in a way that recalls the balanced nuance of his name. Moses does

28 Davies notes, "He cannot act extra-juridically one day and juridically the next, on his own authority then on that of the law." *Ibid.*, 135.

29 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 90. See further, 89, 91.

30 *Ibid.*, 23.

31 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 132.

not envisage the critical moment of rejection in verse 14. It is in that scene that a member of his Hebrew people will renounce both his familial *and* imperial positions (discussion to follow).

The question asked by Moses “Why do you strike your companion?” harkens to a similar question uttered previously by God (Gen 4:9). In this sense Moses’ attempt at intercession takes on a “divine” quality. While the reader might expect the hearers of the question to scurry away like Cain, the Exodus narrative reverses course. Unexpectedly, it is Moses who finishes on the run.³² The failure of the question to broker peace, and the Cain-esque running that results, indicate a role reversal highlighting the profundity of Moses’ dysfunction. Like Cain, Moses killed a man, and like Cain it is outside knowledge of the act that compels him to escape. The narrator is keen to communicate the puzzling nature of Moses. While he speaks like the righteous God, he behaves like the wicked Cain.

The attempt to quell the Hebrew skirmish is met with surprising resistance. Moses’ single question is doubled by the sarcastic quips of the respondent. The remnants of colonial mimicry are still evident. These rebuttal questions are more than an indication of relational abuse³³ or an authentic note about fear of death.³⁴ The man ridicules Moses in order to expose the facts of the case. Though Moses thinks of himself as powerful, he is indeed powerless. In the first of two rhetorical questions, the Israelite interlocutor seizes an opportunity to put Moses in his place.

The hendiadys at the center of the question (Who set you as *chief and judge* over us?) brands Moses’ authority as anemic (see 4:1; 5:21; 14:11–12; 6:9–12). For any answer is an admission.³⁵ The former term (שַׂר) speaks to his political supremacy, the latter (שֹׁפֵט) to his judicial authority. Moses is bankrupt on both counts. Though intended cynically, the question introduces the need to establish political and legal credentials. The first begins to receive its answer in Exod 3 though it reappears throughout the wilderness narratives in the face of incessant Israelite murmuring. The legal question prefigures later episodes in which Moses performs in judicial capacities as a law-giver (Exod 18:13–16; Deut 1:9–18).

Nevertheless, the Hebrew’s question sidesteps Moses’ appeal by reusing שַׂר (“chief/ruler”) of 1:11. In that story, it was meant for Egyptian taskmasters. The response presumes that Moses looks and/or acts the part of state power, though

32 Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 12.

33 So Fretheim, *Exodus*, 44.

34 So Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 66.

35 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 136.

ineffectively. What was outlined above is here repeated. While Moses appeals to Hebrew connectedness, he is more closely allied to the norms of the Egyptian oppressor. For how can Moses referee justly among the repressed if he has not felt the sting of that repression? How can one who has never lived under the Egyptian thumb possibly commiserate with the labor force? How can Moses, so allied to the violent legacy of Egypt, now contend for peace? Additionally, the “us” of the inquiry may relate to corporate Israel, as it also relates to the arguing duo. In either scenario its use effectively cuts Moses out. Moses’ use of violence, his care to remain secretive, the callousness and arrogance the Hebrew man senses, his connection to Cain, his role as architect of death, and now the appearance of שר prove overwhelming. Together these elements exclude and condemn Moses as a member of Egypt.

Here again Fanon’s aforementioned *Wretched of the Earth*, widely considered the Magna Carta of the anticolonial campaign, may be instructive for understanding the biblical text in a parallel fashion. Beyond Fanon’s incendiary calls for armed revolution and insurgency, *Wretched* chronicles the pitfalls associated with efforts to galvanize a national consciousness as it emerges in the wake of colonialism’s demise.

Fanon devotes much energy to describing the internal challenges faced by a burgeoning nation’s elite classes and their relationships with the urban masses. The burgeoning elite, Fanon maintains, are tasked with repudiating themselves. That is, an *authentic* national bourgeoisie will reject its status as it becomes evermore subservient to the needs of the masses. This will mean turning its back on its First World destiny and require dispensing the colonist’s intellectual capital, gathered in the colonial university, for the good of those living in the homeland.³⁶ The hope for this is nearly nil since the national bourgeoisie “often turns away from this heroic and positive path, which is both productive and just, and unabashedly opts for the antinational, and therefore abhorrent, path of a conventional bourgeoisie, a bourgeois bourgeoisie that is dismally, inanely, and cynically bourgeois.”³⁷

The oppression of the colonist is exchanged for that of the national bourgeoisie, which has little interest in the needs of the larger populace. A brand of elision takes place. The colonial legacy is not eradicated, but lives on in the newly exalted class. Thus, orthodox nationalism actually replicates imperialism, thereby remaining and expanding its original control. For “The former

36 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 98–99.

37 Ibid., 99. See further, 111. On the role of the leader acting as a screen between national bourgeoisie and the people see 111–115. For the fullest explanation of the national bourgeoisie see 98, 100–102, 110–111.

metropolis therefore governs indirectly both through the bourgeoisie it nurtures and the national army which is trained and supervised by its experts to transfix, immobilize and terrorize the people.”³⁸ Tragically, culture remains the regimented and managed domain of the colonist.

With Fanon as backdrop, the words of the Hebrew discussant prove lethal. He is not satisfied to simply exclude Moses from one pole and place him neatly on the other. In teasing Moses, the Hebrew critiques even his Egyptian prowess; in other words, Moses’ power to operate as the sole agent of a national bourgeoisie is extinguished. In effect, though Moses considers himself, and perhaps is, powerful among Egyptians, that power is diffused among Hebrews. Moses enjoys privilege, but that privilege does not award him *carte blanche* to serve as imperial judge. The Hebrew man is aware that Moses may look the part, but he does not possess the proper status afforded to legitimized Egyptians. An Egyptian who is unable to authoritatively command even lowly Hebrews, indeed, is no Egyptian at all, but a crude caricature. Implicitly, the rhetoric of the response articulates and answers a basic question. Will an impostor Egyptian now serve as colonial mother?³⁹ By no means! Moses’ attempt to squelch squabbles rings hollow to Israelite ears. The men of 2:14 are happy to go on struggling against one another. Even in their altercation there is a kind of freedom into which Moses cannot speak. The Hebrew population will handle grievances on its own. Egyptian power has its limits.

The Hebrew man’s first response tears at both poles. Moses is without authority to decree judgment from the position of state power. Neither does he possess the authority to decree judgment from the position of underclass power. Even the brash and forthright reply of the Hebrew indicates that Moses cannot number entirely among the Egyptians. A slave is unlikely to address an Egyptian with such open, unflinching, and rebellious disdain.⁴⁰ Not even social respect is afforded Moses. As a powerless Egyptian, his very identity is in dispute.

The second question, “Are you thinking to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” is both a threat and taunt. In later episodes the larger Israelite community will reply with similar obstinacy (16:2–3; 17:3–4). In the immediate scene, the question gives rise to a second severing. Moses is cut off from the Hebrew community.

38 Ibid., 119.

39 See Ibid., 149.

40 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 88. See further Propp who entertains the possibilities of implied meanings for considering Moses as either Hebrew or Egyptian. *Exodus* 1–18, 167.

The crisis already brewing within Moses is exacerbated. The Hebrew respondent entertains the possibility of full disclosure. The Moses-Hebrew relationship is not one founded on mutual trust and commitment. The taunt carries the likelihood that Moses, an inauthentic Egyptian, could not survive the scrutiny of his actions perpetrated against a proper Egyptian. Indeed, the fact that the report eventually comes to Pharaoh (v. 15) implies that through some avenue, perhaps via the Hebrew community, the threat materializes.

At the heart of the Hebrew man's reply is the specter of a hypothetical second attack. We recall that Moses appealed to shared identity as a rationale against infighting (v. 13). Yet for the Hebrew to suggest the possibility that Moses would kill *him*, refutes the basis upon which Moses' plea rests. Only by undercutting the premise of Moses' appeal, kinship, can a second murder take place. The taunt highlights Moses' estrangement from Israel. It is also suggestive of Moses' penchant for Egyptian-style bloodshed. Only if Moses is in fact a non-Hebrew can another violence scenario transpire.

Taken together, the Hebrew's questions playfully condemn Moses as they utterly reject him. The first refutes his kinship claims by affirming his Egyptian rank, and yet quickly divests Moses of Egyptian-like power. He is no ruler or judge over Israel. The second question again strips Moses of any Hebrew affiliations. He is not a Hebrew champion but an opportunistic killer. The respondent's two questions reveal that Moses belongs to neither context. Moses is doubly disqualified and severed from both peoples/loci of identity. Both poles are abruptly closed to him. He is not "them" and neither is he "us."

Moses discovers that those he considered his own have betrayed him. Moses' looking "this way and that" (v. 12) did not nullify the gaze of the rescued Hebrew. Moses' "idealized solidarity" will not do.⁴¹ He behaves presumptuously, not only to attempt adjudication, but more importantly, to number himself among the Other. The men of the scene not only dis-identify with Moses, but they refuse to allow him to identify with them. Moses is effectively excommunicated from the Hebrew population. As in the episode of Pharaoh dis-identifying with Joseph, so now another distancing event comes to pass.

Moreover, the scene places Moses in profound chaos. Because his actions failed to win him the middle way of his female forerunners, it is best to speak of Moses as triply dislocated for the moment. No position can adequately house him. The explanations of Heb 11:24 "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter" and Acts 7:25, "He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescu-

41 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 33.

ing them, but they did not understand” undercut the intentionally confusing nature of the Exodus account. These rationalizations dissolve the inner struggle facing Moses by exaggerating his level of awareness and agency. The Moses of Exod 2 is unprepared to respond to this unsettling revelation. He has no retort for the Hebrew. Not even the training in rhetoric he would have presumably garnered as a member of Pharaoh’s court can serve as resource. The reader senses this disorientation when Moses moves instantly from self-installed judge to self-preservation. His high-minded concern for the beaten Hebrew is forgotten.⁴² The crisis of Mosaic identity replaces the issue of the squabbling men.

Moses reacts with fear.⁴³ Indeed, Moses’ trepidation is well-founded. Pharaoh’s intelligence system has already proven itself to be well-organized (1:18). Additionally, intimate knowledge of Pharaoh reveals him to be a curt, vindictive ruler. The ill-tempered Pharaoh is likely to react capriciously, deciding for those he deems insiders, and punishing the Other. Given Egyptian ethnic pride, Moses knows that Pharaoh will not acquit an outsider who has killed an Egyptian. Even the well-connected Moses is vulnerable. His outsider status trumps his insider associations.

As in Exod 1, Pharaoh in 2:15 does not require a protracted investigation to render judgment. Pharaoh’s verdict, like that of 1:22, is swift. As ever, he remains committed to the annihilation of outsiders. He who once sought Hebrew lives returns to the task. Moses must be exterminated. Pharaoh’s undaunted desire to kill Moses without having heard the facts of the case indicates distaste for him. Pharaoh’s impulse to eliminate Moses may also imply that he is aware of, uneasy about, and ready to rectify, Moses’ rather unorthodox inclusion in the Egyptian court. Alternatively, the killing might elicit sharp questions Moses could not, or would not, keep secret any longer. The fact that Moses understands the severity of his actions again indicates that while he attempted to ally himself with the Hebrew people, he is better suited to predict the Egyptian reaction. The narrator validates Moses’ connections to Egyptian court procedures by reporting the truth of what Moses anticipates. Pharaoh’s desire is to kill him.

Moses still moves as before (vv. 11, 13), but now he can no longer afford to float freely from palace to worksite and back. Moses now moves in a single direction in order to survive. Running perhaps indicates that while afforded

42 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 167.

43 Meyer surmises that perhaps Moses’ fear is meant to contrast, in an unfavorable sense, with the reverent fear of the midwives (1:17, 21). *The Message of Exodus*, 39.

unparalleled social status as a member of Pharaoh's extended family, he has always been precariously seated on the *perimeter* of that family. Moses is no Egyptian. While a member of the inside, he has always been an outsider. Surely a proper Egyptian of the royal court would have little difficulty quelling Hebrew accusations. Surely his word could stand against that of a Hebrew accuser. Certainly Moses could devise another clever plot in the shadow of political powers (as others have accomplished before him) to secure his survival. Yet he does not.

The fact that Moses runs because he assumes that his killing has been revealed only heightens his own instability. The content and boldness of the Hebrew man's initial reply, followed by the open rebelliousness of his second response, gives way to deep uncertainty in Moses. The outer clash of the feuding men and the threat of imperial agents giving chase underscore the hidden conflict that begins to rage within Moses. Ethnically Hebrew but socially Egyptian, Moses' attempt to identify with the Israelite extreme is met with resistance. A deep psychological deletion begins to set in. The shock of the unit rests in the fact that *Moses himself* becomes the contested territory.

Identity as Self-Erasure: Moses' Personal Denunciation (Exodus 2:15b–22)

2:15b But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and arrived in the land of Midian, and he sat down by the well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. And they arrived and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 But the shepherds came and they drove them out. Then Moses arose and saved them and watered their flock. 18 When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so quickly today?" 19 And they said, "An Egyptian man delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water for us and watered the flock."

20 And he said to his daughters, "And where is he? Why is it that you have abandoned the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." 21 Moses consented to reside with the man, and he gave Zipporah, his daughter, to Moses. 22 And she bore a son, and he named him, Gershom; for he said, "I have been a resident alien in a foreign land."

Exod 2:15b–22

Glimmers of Transformation

The reader is alerted to the coming finality of the unit in 2:15b, where the last of Moses' three exoduses is recorded.⁴⁴ Moses comes to rest (יָשַׁב) twice. The semantic field for יָשַׁב encapsulates both momentary stillness (to sit) and prolonged permanence (to remain, dwell, reside). Because a well denotes a place of regular visitation, the second usage of יָשַׁב must be rendered in terms of a transient stopover. Thus "to sit" is preferred. The first יָשַׁב may then refer to residence, so that Moses first settles in the region in advance of sitting by the well.⁴⁵ By signaling a landed Moses the text may be seeking to indicate that he will react with greater moderation and self-control than previously. The scene may seek to evoke serenity and stability as Moses collects his thoughts in a brief moment of narrative respite. Most translations follow suit, first communicating permanence,⁴⁶ followed by a second act of momentary sitting.⁴⁷

Conversely, Houtman argues that a fugitive is likely to go directly to a well, which functions as a social meeting destination for shepherds, travelers, and locals alike.⁴⁸ Calvin suggests that travelers were sure to encounter locals at the well site, suggesting that Moses may be in the process of inquiring about hospitality.⁴⁹ Moreover, argues Houtman, permanence comes only at the close of the scene, not at its inception. For it is near the end of the chapter that Moses opts to remain (in a permanent sense) at the request of Reuel.⁵⁰ Likewise,

44 Blenkinsopp considers the first to be Moses' initial movement, which culminated in the death of the Egyptian aggressor. Moses' second exodus is his subsequent outing, which leads to the mediation scene. *The Pentateuch*, 148.

45 So also Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 23; Gispén, *Exodus*, 45; Jacob, *The Second Book*, 39; Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation* (ed. and trans. Martin I. Lockshin; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 27.

46 "Settled" (CEV, NAS), "stayed" (ESV), "dwelt" (KJV, JPS), "live" (NIV, NLT).

47 "sat" (ASV, ESV, KJV, NASB, NCV, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, RSV), "sitting" (CEB, CEV, GNT). The NET offers "settled" for both instances.

48 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:305.

49 Calvin, *Commentaries*, 51. The dangerous reputation of outsiders meant that it was conventional to dwell near the local well in anticipation of securing an invitation. Failure to extend hospitality, as in Judg 19:15, reflected poorly on the community and served as an insult to the sojourner in need. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., "Hospitality," *DBI*, 402–403. On the nature and importance of hospitality, see Gen 19:1–3; 24:31–32; Judg 19:14–21; Job 31:32; of God as host, see Ps 23; 104; Amos 9:13–15; Joel 3:18; Isa 25:6–8; of tent groups specifically, see Gen 18:1–8; Isa 21:14. Abuses of hospitality are clearly condemned in Gen 19:4–11 and Judg 19:22–26.

50 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:306. So also Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:433.

NJB and TNK gloss the initial יָשָׁב as “went into” and “arrived” (respectively) to portray Moses as a drifter and wanderer throughout the scene.

While both options are plausible,⁵¹ the harried nature of the immediate flight from Egypt corresponds more fully with the work of Houtman, and the renderings found in NJB, and TNK reading. Moses first arrives in the region then sits by the well. The fact that the daughters of Reuel will soon identify Moses as an Egyptian (v. 19) perhaps means that he still wears the emblems of empire.⁵² A fugitive living in a neighboring territory for a prolonged period is unlikely to persist in Egyptian-style garb. Moses is, after all, an outlaw fearful of being recognized or questioned. The reappearance of יָשָׁב in verse 21, wherein Moses settles among the Midianites in marriage, may contrast his more impermanent existence in verse 15b. Perhaps the chapter’s triple use of יָשָׁב is meant to underscore the dawn of a new life for Moses.⁵³

Moses is set to encounter the region’s seminomadic pastoralists and camleers in the desert wilderness. His arrival at “the well” (הַבְּאֵר) likely indicates a prominent well of the district⁵⁴ or perhaps specifies the well of this particular story.⁵⁵ Regardless, the well scene invites rich and evocative images at home in folkloric literature, not unlike those of the Nile and desert. The well is not only a place of refreshment near which one might encounter settlements, but it functions as the center of social and economic existence for nomadic and village communities.⁵⁶ Thus it comes to symbolize life, hope, and imminent good news.⁵⁷ Genesis also features wells in association with betrothal and marriage narratives (Gen 24, 29;⁵⁸ see further John 4). In light of these cognate

51 See Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 120–121.

52 So Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 25; Jacob, *The Second Book*, 41; Sarna, *Exodus*, 12; Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 68; Gispén, *Exodus*, 46; Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 13; Fox, *Now These Are the Names*, 21; Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 46. According to Sarna, the angel’s call for him to remove his sandals (3:5) is perhaps indicative of Moses retaining the practices learned while growing up among the Egyptian aristocracy. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 39.

53 Fox, *Now These Are the Names*, 19.

54 Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:433.

55 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 23.

56 See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 123–126. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., “Well, Meeting at the,” *DBI*, 940–941. See especially page 940 on the metaphoric function of wells. Michael G. Vanzant, “Wells,” *NinDB* 5:841–842.

57 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 24. Meyers, *Exodus*, 44.

58 Siebert-Hommes identifies lexical similarities with הַבְּאֵר (the well) and שָׁקָה (to give to drink). Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 121.

episodes, this well may even symbolize fertility and perhaps function as a sign for female.⁵⁹ In type-scenes wells often entail the meeting of a woman come to draw, an invitation to the patriarch's home, an engagement, and a wedding.⁶⁰

Additionally, the well represents impending antagonism and discord. The coming skirmish of verse 17 reflects the fact that while the well is emblematic of life, viability, and wealth, it can also be a place of conflict. So essential to survival is the well that clashes over water privileges necessitate the need for specific usage rites and practices (Gen 13:1–12; 21:25–31; 26:17–22; 29:1–10). Naturally, it is a place prone to interpersonal and tribal friction.⁶¹ Here again, water figures as a substance associated with life *and* danger. The well scene cultivates suspense that arouses the reader's expectancy. Something dramatic is set to happen.

As with the well, a second stereotypical feature of folktales is the use of numbers three, seven, and twelve.⁶² Triads abound. Moses is hidden for three months and now entertains a mediating role for a third time.⁶³ A third set of daughters is encountered.⁶⁴ Additionally, the seven daughters of Reuel convey ideal completeness. Together with the women of chapter 1 and those of chapter 2's opening story, Siebert-Hommes totals the female figures at twelve, thereby drawing attention to an interesting correspondence. For her, "The fate of the *twelve sons* of Israel depends on the one son who was born and remained alive thanks to the intervention of *twelve 'daughters.'*"⁶⁵ This symmetry seems to recognize and valorize the indispensable role of the female characters.⁶⁶

59 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 52. The arrival of the seven daughters may also symbolize the coming matrimony and its resulting procreation. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 171. The appearance of the shepherdesses may suggest a dearth of male sons in the Midianite clan. John H. Walton, Victor H. Mathews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InverVarsity, 2000), 79. Another suggestion is that they are unmarried since it is unlikely that married women would be called upon to care for animals. Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 43.

60 On type-scenes in general, see Alter, 47–62. For specific comments on the function of type-scene in this text, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 56–58 and Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 146–150.

61 Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 31; Noth, *Exodus*, 36.

62 See further 1 Sam 2:5; 16:10; Jer 15:9; and Job 1:2; 42:8, 13; Ruth 4:15.

63 Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 40.

64 Walton, Mathews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 79.

65 Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter," 74.

66 Julie Faith Parker additionally argues that the women of Exod 2 are rather young. The use of בַּת communicates youth in order to highlight the courage and mettle of the characters.

The seven daughters perform utilitarian tasks among the community. They draw water and mind animals. Like their feminine forerunners in Exod 1, they are capable and efficient. The verbs used to convey their activities come in staccato style (v. 16). With swiftness and simplicity, together the females arrive (בוא),⁶⁷ draw (דלה), and fill (מלא). Perhaps their movements are meant not only to present them as attractive, lively and spirited, but also to depict the arduous effort involved in the procurement of water, and in turn, to elicit the reader's indignation at the callousness of the coming shepherds.⁶⁸

Though able to draw water, the females cannot defend themselves against the unscrupulous interlopers. The particulars of the offense are rather nebulous. The arriving men may have attempted to steal the work of the shepherdesses by interrupting them from finishing their task, or by blocking them altogether from beginning it. Most translations convey completed actions with the use of "and" (ותדלנה ותמלאנה את־הרהטים). The daughters fully accomplish the act of filling the troughs (ASV, KJV, JPS, RSV). Other translations are more attuned to the *hiphil* infinitive construct להשקות ("to cause to drink") and so conceive of the entire clause as intended—yet to be completed—action (NRSV, CEV, NASB, NIV, GNT). The fact that Moses waters the daughters' flock in the next verse offers little clarity. The conflict may have caused water to spill, requiring Moses to draw fresh water.⁶⁹ Alternatively, Moses may perform the job entirely or complete what has already begun but has been interrupted in the scuffle.

In verse 17, the adversative *waw* of the opening word (ויבאו) indicates a coming conflict with the miscreant shepherds. The expected betrothal and marriage is delayed in the immediate story. While Genesis's well scenes convey the preservation and continuance of Israelite lineage, this episode in the life of Moses focuses on the defense of the daughters.⁷⁰

These figures are not grown women, as interpreters are prone to assume, but girls and young teens. "Where Have All the Girls Gone? Hermeneutical Strategies for Finding the Bible's Girls Applied to Exodus 2" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago, 18 November 2012).

67 Ackerman notes that the use of "to come" frames the episode. It is attributed to the daughters, the roguish shepherds, and again to the daughters. Ackerman, "The Moses Birth Story," 103.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 104. Cassuto also argues for the possibility that Moses draws water, offering further that the corrupt shepherds may have used some water, or that the entire scene occurs before the daughters' water-fetching is complete. *A Commentary*, 25.

70 Davies notes variances between this and more static type-scenes. *Israel in Egypt*, 146.

The narrative is spare. We are not told if Moses fights actively or intimidates, neither do we know the number of shepherds involved. Only the outcome is relayed. Moses confronts the threat and delivers/saves (יָשַׁע). His courageous will to act portends YHWH's future determination to rescue. In this act, he prefigures the work of the "saving" God (Exod 14:13, 30; 15:2; Judg 2:18; 1 Sam 10:19; Jer 31:7; Hab 3:13). The literary connections to future events are impossible to overlook. As both leader and protector, Moses will shepherd the Israelites in the wilderness.⁷¹ As he draws out the water, so he will draw out the people. The provision of water for the daughters' flock is repeated in his provision of water for Israel in transit (17:1–6). The wilderness locale of Moses' benevolent actions is set in parallel to the wilderness locale of YHWH's coming benevolent actions. According to Fretheim, the wilderness episode is a time of preparation and embodiment. For in these years, "Moses both *relives the fate of his people and anticipates their near future*."⁷²

The present event also creates symmetry and antithesis with previous episodes. For instance, the shepherds are performing their abuse in the midst of the life-giving resource that is the well, just as Pharaoh also attacked life by sentencing Hebrew infants to watery deaths.⁷³ Likewise, Moses' actions are borrowed from the characters of the preceding story. He performs an act that follows the example of his near contemporaries. The moment of his rising (קוּם) may suggest Moses is sitting down and stands to engage, though most likely the word means simply to move to act.⁷⁴ Against his previous rising (out of the water), Moses now rises of his own accord. He moves under his own power, and in so doing, joins the Israelites of Exod 1 and links himself to the actions of the princess who drew him up. Moses will not be left low. Against the rising of Pharaoh to power and the domination of the weak (1:8), now Moses rises to accomplish opposite aims: to defend the vulnerable.⁷⁵

71 Propp understands the image of the shepherd as polyvalent. When used of God, it communicates power and authority. When others are in view, it conveys humility and obedience. *Exodus* 1–18, 222.

72 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 42. For an extended discussion of the unit's (2:11–22) anticipatory nature, see 41–45.

73 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 25.

74 Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 44–45.

75 Davies catalogs the reappearance of קוּם (along with several other words) in Pharaoh's climactic response to the death of firstborns. For him, Exod 1–2 and 12:30–32 are well-connected by their use of similar vocabulary. For a full list of occurrences, see *Israel in Egypt*, 157–158.

Despite having inherited the impulsiveness of his adoptive grandfather, Moses also internalizes valuable lessons from the women. Like them, he maintains indignation at injustice⁷⁶ but he no longer behaves with the rashness of the prior scene (vv. 11–12). Like the female figures, Moses resists oppression without falling prey to overreaction or the excesses of violence. Moses is here a restorer of order and a defender. He is upholding the importance of proper well usage in the community.⁷⁷ The drawing of water replicates the drawing-out event of his infancy rescue. As his adoptive mother drew him from the water, so now he draws water in the context of another liberation. Finally, he does not resort to deadly violence but shows bravery *and* constraint. He learns to resist oppression more strategically.

More importantly, in saving the daughters Moses traverses social boundaries to the locus of the Other. He is here transcending Pharaoh's coarse identity ideology. Moses comes to defend the fearsome Midianites.⁷⁸ He acts for the benefit of the non-Hebrew⁷⁹ and gendered outsider.⁸⁰ She who once saved the outsider child is brought to mind as Moses now saves ostracized women. The beneficiary of feminine compassion now extends compassion to females (seven of them at that!). Not only does Moses act for the benefit of the opposite gender, but also the act of drawing water is a task not usually executed by men.⁸¹

76 Sarna recognizes that Moses' impulse is so strong that even though a fugitive and alone, he nevertheless defends the weak. *Exodus*, 12. In contrast, Motyer sees Moses' self-embroilment in a squabble over well rights as proof that again he undertakes impulsive and risky behaviors. *Exodus*, 41.

77 Ashby, *Exodus*, 16.

78 Midian has a checkered reputation in the First Testament. Episodes of amicable relations include the present text and Exod 18, in which Midianite contact shapes the burgeoning Israelite legal system. But considerable strife is also recorded (Gen 36:35; 37:28; Num 22:4,7; 25:6–7, 17–18; 31:1–12; Josh 13:21; Judg 6–8; 1 Chr 1:46; Ps 83:9; Isa 10:26; Hab 3:7). Some commentators believe this tradition is representative of an early history in which Midianites and Israelites are on friendly terms. Sarna, *Exodus*, 11; *Exploring Exodus*, 35. It is also postulated that the term "Midian" should be understood generally of desert dwellers and not of this specific people. See further Propp's brief discussion in *Exodus 1–18*, 176; George E. Mendenhall, "Midian," *ABD* 4:815–818. A more recent discussion of Otherness construction with regard to Jethro and the Midianites is offered by Leveen. She investigates the conflicted representation of Midianites in the Torah. See Adriane Leveen, "Inside Out: Jethro, the Midianites and a Biblical Construction of the Outsider," *JOT* 34.4 (2010): 395–417.

79 Ackerman, "The Moses Birth Story," 103.

80 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:295.

81 Propp thus views this act as one of "implicit self-deprecation" and reminiscent of medieval

Moses closes the scene by working like the women. The ethnocentric dogma he adopted from Pharaoh is being dismantled. In saving those who are not like him, Moses shows growth. He is undergoing a moment of reorientation.

Moses' Misidentification and Continued Dislocation

So efficient is Moses at the task of drawing water that the Midianite daughters arrive home ahead of schedule. The priest of Midian, referred to tangentially in verse 16, is curious. The first of his three questions, "How is it that you have come back so quickly today?" carries an element of surprise. We are left to wonder if maltreatment of the daughters is a routine occurrence.

The reply of the daughters is telling in both lexical and grammatical ways, as it is psychologically tragic. The vocabulary foreshadows. The daughters recall the chivalrous assistance by using נָצַל to talk about the "deliverance." As a *Leitwort*, appearing in 3:8 and 6:6, it comes to describe YHWH's salvific acts (see 5:23; 6:6; 12:27; 18:4, 8, 9, 10). Corresponding with יָשַׁע of verse 17, נָצַל suggests that Moses' actions are programmatic of imminent divine deeds. The daughters are quick to praise the assistance they received. They reminisce emphatically וגם־דלה לנו ("and also drew water for us"). Their enthusiastic report,⁸² as Jacob notes, may rest in the fact that a man comes to their aid.⁸³ Perhaps also, they are astounded that this man is an Egyptian.

The recognition of Moses as an Egyptian is possibly meant to differentiate him from the thuggish shepherds.⁸⁴ Perhaps by observing his garb, shaven face, behavior, and speech, the daughters think they have exegeted the matter aright. The information delivered to Reuel is expressed positively. To the surprise and shock of the daughters, a member of the powerful Egyptians was now among them and fighting on their behalf against scoundrels. Yet the identification of Moses as an Egyptian does more than demarcate him from the villains; it exacerbates the double resistance of the previous confrontation (v. 14). This note adds dimension to the ever-vacillating and indeterminate identity of the protagonist.

chivalry. *Exodus* 1–18, 173. On the notion of Moses' act as one of disinterested chivalry, see G.A. Chadwick, *The Book of Exodus* (EB; New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1897), 40–41; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 46.

82 Propp, citing Ehrlich, identifies a possible contradiction with verses 16–17 in which the daughters draw water. Moses may draw more water, or the exhilarated daughters may be overstating Moses' role. *Exodus* 1–18, 173. So also Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:295.

83 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 41. Jacob also notices that the drawing of water by Moses reverses the normative scenario in which women customarily draw (Gen 24).

84 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:312.

His time under the care of Pharaoh's daughter has left an indelible mark.⁸⁵ Though self-expelled from the halls of power and privilege, Moses cannot outrun the imprint of empire. We recall that Moses begins the chapter considering himself an Israelite (v. 11, 13), is rebuked from that station (v. 14), and now among Midianites is re-installed. However, now such a role does not serve him. The fact that he still looks like an Egyptian intensifies the disjointed nature of Moses' identity. The image of an Egyptian elite male wandering the desert is as disjunctive as it is alarming. In the pastoral setting, Moses embodies a profound incongruity. He does not fit in. In Egypt he attempted to ally himself with his kinfolk but was rebuffed. Now wishing for anonymity, he is made a member of the Egyptian high culture. He is no Egyptian in the eyes of Pharaoh, neither is he a Hebrew in the eyes of his kinfolk, and again, he is certainly no Midianite in the initial interpretation of Reuel's daughters. His identity is wildly in flux. He cannot seem to escape his own difference. Even in Midian, among outsiders, he remains an outsider.

Reuel senses a measure of this estrangement as he responds to the report of an Egyptian savior. In a moment of potential levity, Moses is left at the well. Houtman proposes the more forceful "forsaken/abandoned" for עָזַב.⁸⁶ A possible explanation for the women's desertion of Moses may rest in ANE cultural norms. Females are not to invite grown men without permission.⁸⁷ Or possibly, in their excitement, the daughters eschew decorum and scuttle home to inform Reuel.⁸⁸ Whatever the case, Reuel will not allow for Moses' neglect. He offers Moses a meal.

The opening verb of verse 21 is further indicative of Moses' estrangement. The translations are discordant. Some gloss the *hiphil* וַיֵּאָל as "content" (ASV, ESV, JPS, KJV, RSV). The implication is of passive satisfaction. With no better options before him, Moses settles for the offer of Reuel to remain permanently. Others convey an opposite measure of agency. Moses "swore" (WYC) or "decided" (GNT) to stay. The majority of translations mediate between extremes by offering "agreed" (NRSV, NJB, NAB, CEB, CEV, NIV), "willing" (NASB), "accepted invitation" (NLT), and "consented" (TNK). In these glosses Moses is in need of coaxing. If, as I argue below, Moses' naming of Gershom is a moment of narrative tragedy, then the acquiescent rendering of יָאָל ("agreed, willing, accepted invitation, consented") captured in the majority of translations seems the better contextual option. The diffident Moses is in need of persuading.

85 Ibid.

86 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:312–313.

87 So Ibid., 313. See further Gen 24:28 and 29:12.

88 Durham, *Exodus*, 23.

Presumably, in light of the fact that Zipporah (“bird”) is given in marriage, the reader is to understand she is the eldest daughter.⁸⁹ As the translation of her name indicates,⁹⁰ she will show herself to be every bit as courageous and intrepid as her precursors (see 4:24–26).⁹¹ For now only her name and the pertinent data are given. She conceives and births a son (v. 22a). Moses replicates the fertility of his Hebrew predecessors by procreating with his new wife.

The life-saving hospitality of Pharaoh’s daughter is replicated in Reuel’s kindness. For a second time Moses is drawn into a foreign but welcoming context. Acceptance and love come to Moses in unanticipated ways and via unanticipated envoys. Here it is the Other who welcomes and loves the Other. Additionally, the two questions of Reuel (v. 20) stand in contrast to the pair of rhetorical questions uttered previously (v. 14). Those inquiries severed Moses from Egyptian and Hebrew existences. The stern rebuke by the Israelite combatant is set in contrast to the experience of openness among Reuel’s kin group.⁹² Reuel’s invitation⁹³ is about inclusiveness and acceptance, not the creation of distance. In his offer is the antidote to the previous severing. Not all is lost for our hero. A further rescuing is underway. As with the life-saving work of Pharaoh’s daughter, there are yet outsiders willing to traverse expected norms to offer life-saving and life-preserving possibilities.

Reuel’s offer of hospitality leads to the chapter’s climactic moment, Moses’ response. With the birth of his son complete (22a), Moses takes stock of these rapid events. The hurried flight from Egypt now behind him, Moses is finally free to reflect. In light of Reuel’s tender care and provision, the reader might expect a moment of self-acceptance. Moses will surely respond with elation at most and relief at the very least. We might surmise that he will rejoice and resound with enthusiasm at his new life, new wife, and new child. We might

89 Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 47.

90 Zipporah’s name may indicate totemism as a virtue held among Midianite people, which aimed to ascribe to newborn children hoped-for animalistic qualities. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 68.

91 However, on the diminishment of female agency in the betrothal scenes of Genesis and Exodus, see Fuchs, “Structure and Patriarchal Functions,” 7–13.

92 So Fretheim, *Exodus*, 44; Enns, *Exodus*, 84.

93 Siebert-Hommes notes that the translation of Reuel (“friend of God”) is meant to emphasize his role in the narrative, against the vile behavior of Pharaoh. “But If She Be a Daughter,” 72; cf. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 127–128. Siebert-Hommes draws another connection between Reuel and God, citing their shared use of קרָא to relate to Moses. *Ibid.*, 132–133.

expect him to rest, now that he is among a prominent Midianite family. What comes, however, adds dissonance rather than tranquility.

The Meaning/s of Gershom

The episode culminates in verse 22 wherein Moses names his son.⁹⁴ The naming event resonates with that of his infancy.⁹⁵ Citing adoption literature in the field of psychology, Caroline Peyser recalls that the birth of a first child for adoptees is a powerful moment triggering ardent emotions. Stirred to reflection as he cradles his son, Moses finally gives voice to his own feelings of separation.⁹⁶

Moses declares to the community at large.⁹⁷ The son is named גֶרְשֹׁם. Multiple meanings are operative. At the *prima facie*, level “Gershom” plays on the assonance with גֵר (“alien, resident alien, stranger, sojourner”) and the adverb שָׁם (“there”), making them into a compound. However, on strictly philological grounds, the name is most likely derived from גָּרַשׁ (“to drive out, cast out, thrust out”). If גָּרַשׁ is the root, then the name may create parallelism with וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם (“and they drove them out”), which is used to describe the act of the nefarious shepherds (v. 17).⁹⁸ Moses names his son after the well episode that comes to define his reputation in Midian as a rescuer. Gershom is a living, breathing reminder of the expulsion event suffered by Reuel’s daughters earlier in the chapter.⁹⁹

94 For fathers giving names see Gen 4:26; 5:3, 29; 16:15; 19:37–38; 21:3; Exod 18:14; Deut 41:51–52; Judg 13:24; 2 Sam 12:24–25; 1 Chr 7:23; Job 42:14. For mothers giving names see Gen 4:25; 29:32–35; 30; 35:18; 38:3–5; Exod 2:10; Ruth 4:17; 1 Sam 1:20; 4:21; 1 Chr 4:9; 7:16.

95 The story of Moses is enclosed within two marriage stories (2:1, 21) and two naming events (2:10, 22) to form a thematic *inclusio*.

96 Caroline Peyser, “The Book of Exodus: A Search for Identity,” in *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts* (ed. Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman; New York: Urim, 2000), 390.

97 As opposed to verse 14 in which Moses contemplates to himself, here the clause carries outward connotations. Moses is not exercising pensiveness. He is announcing the name and its significance to those in the audience. Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 48.

98 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 26; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 91; Meyers, *Exodus*, 45; Sarna, *Exodus*, 12. Propp notices that the verb appears with the masculine plural ending where the feminine is expected. This feature may be a scribal error or the work of a redactor attempting to solidify the rhyming with “Gershom.” *Exodus 1–18*, 169–170, 172. Less likely, Bush assumes that the masculine plural ending is meant to refer to the existence of men-servants. He postulates that it is unlikely for a large group of unprotected females to be working without the benefit of male attendants or escorts. *Notes*, 33.

99 Enns, *Exodus*, 84.

Additionally, the name may serve to unify Moses' experience of self-exile with that of the once-abused Midianite daughters. Both he and they were driven off. Third, the name may bear allusive dimensions, serving as a promise that the son will follow in his father's footsteps. In Gershom, the community will have another expeller of threats.¹⁰⁰ More allusion is realized by the reappearance of גֶּרֶשׁ in 6:1, 11:1, and 12:39 where the word recalls Pharaoh's expelling of Israelites from his land. What comes to pass in Exod 2 signals the future ejection event in the exodus story. The meaning of "Gershom" is further complicated by the explanation supplied in the final clause of verse 22.

גר הייתי בארץ נכריה

The clause in question yields a wide variety of interpretive possibilities. Some understand Moses to be expressing homesickness. Thus in Midian Moses is an exile longing to return to his native land.¹⁰¹ His existence in Midian is far removed from that of his time in Egypt. By way of the name, Moses is recalling that he does not belong to this new context. His fidelity rests with another people. In "Gershom," Moses longs to rejoin his suffering countrymen.¹⁰² To accomplish this meaning, however, the perfect verb הייתי must be glossed as "I am," in the present state to designate Midian as the land of the explanation (WYC, CEV, GNT, NAB, MSG). A popular option, this reading is supported by the NIV's "I have *become*,"¹⁰³ which connotes the tragic unfolding of events witnessed within the chapter. Moses is reflecting on his own descent as he longs for Egypt.

While grammatically tenable, for Moses to say "I have become" infers that Moses feels presently unsettled in Midian, and is therefore wistful for Egypt. This translation is plausible but it does not suit the narrative context. It is improbable that Moses longs to return. His home in Egypt is a place of social and political trouble, a place of danger and uncertainty. In the coming dialogue with YHWH, Moses will consistently object to the plan. This is hardly a person nostalgic and eager to return. It is more logical that he would be classified as גר in *Midian*, where he is a migrant, than in Egypt where he is a privileged member of the high class.¹⁰⁴

Others see in the clause a moment of euphoria. Moses is not yearning for his native land; he is blissfully expressing that in Midian he is finally content—

100 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 25.

101 Gispén, *Exodus*, 46. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 49.

102 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 42.

103 Emphasis mine. See also Dozeman, *Exodus*, 91.

104 Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 161.

he is finally home.¹⁰⁵ The name serves as an “etymological reminder,” both of his Midianite journeys and of his new friendships with Reuel and Zipporah.¹⁰⁶ Janzen adds that the pun with שם (“there”) “points away from the present location of the speaker.”¹⁰⁷ It is Egypt that is remote and distanced; Egypt is located out “there.” To achieve such a translation, the flexibility of the perfect must be exercised. The key verb הָיִיתִי must be made to convey an “action completed in the past but continuing in its effects into the present.”¹⁰⁸ Thus major translations offer the nuanced “I have been a stranger/foreigner in a foreign land/country” (NRSV, RSV, KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESV, JPS, CEB, NLT). This gloss suggests something of Moses’ self-assessment of his previous existence. If Midian is home, then Egypt stands in opposition. Although installed in the halls of power and privilege, Moses never felt at ease. For it was in Egypt that Moses subsisted as a resident alien.¹⁰⁹ Now far from that dangerous and unsuitable locale, Moses can rest. Perhaps only now, among itinerant shepherds wandering in the desert, does Moses find respite.

Alternatively, Moses may be musing about his recent experience of sojourn in Midian to draw a contrast with the present, in which he is in the safety of Reuel’s keeping.¹¹⁰ This logic may explain the dual references to Jethro as Moses’ father-in-law in coming units (3:1; 4:18). These instances thereby serve to cement the formal familial union between Moses and now *his* Midianite kinfolk.¹¹¹ In either case it is his present attachment to Reuel’s clan that arouses joy. His son’s life does not alienate Moses from Midian. Gershom ties Moses to the Midianite people. Gershom signals a new beginning.¹¹²

A third option casts Moses in the mold of a hopeful visionary. The naming of Gershom hearkens to a feeling of disenfranchisement and reticence to assimilate, not unlike homesickness. But such a reading does not convey those unhappy implications. While Moses is presently in Midian, he carries with him a sense of openness and positivity about the future, which he considers will

105 So Bruckner, *Exodus*, 35; Durham, *Exodus*, 22, 24; Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Waterloo, CAN: Herald, 2000), 48–49; J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 25; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 174, 221.

106 John W. Wright, “Gershom,” *ABD* 2:993.

107 Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, 48. For the same reasons, Sarna maintains that the land referenced is Egypt, not Midian. *Exodus*, 12–13.

108 Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2d ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 29. Against the conveyance of the present, see Davies, *Israel in Egypt*, 160–161.

109 Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 704.

110 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 174.

111 Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 187.

112 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 42; Also Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 705.

take shape elsewhere.¹¹³ Calvin comments that for Moses, Gershom functions like “an unceasing memorial, by which he might be kept alive to the hope of redemption.”¹¹⁴ The use of גר hearkens back to Genesis and also looks forward. The promise that Abraham’s descendants would exist as sojourners in future generations is again (Joseph) coming to fruition (Gen 15:13) in Moses/Gershom. Looking forward, “the fulfillment of the predicted slavery evokes the associated promise of liberation, so that the birth of the child may be seen as symbolic of the coming regeneration of downtrodden Israel.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, the theme of properly treating outsiders will reappear in what is to come. Not only will Israelites have cause to experience sojourning (Exod 15:13), but also Moses himself will deliver legal material calling for the proper treatment of resident aliens (Exod 22:20–21; 23:9; Lev 19:33–34). Having been numbered among resident aliens himself, he will possess the credentials to speak authoritatively.

This option relies heavily on caricaturing Moses in triumphalist ways. As with the homesick Moses, this too sidesteps the objections he will air in the coming chapters (3:1–4:23). No grand scheme for future redemption seems to be in view for Moses. More troubling is the fact that such a proposal affirms the idea that Moses retains his sense of Israelite identity. Such an assertion imports too much forethought into Moses while divesting the coming encounter with YHWH of its scandalous and shocking dimensions. As I will continue to argue, the Moses of this text hits psychosocial bedrock.

The foregoing options offer compelling but ultimately inadequate conclusions. A postcolonial approach, sensitive to the intense distress Moses is undergoing in the chapter, sees neither homesickness, nor homecoming, nor hopefulness in our protagonist. Rather, Moses’ explanation is best understood as an intentionally inconclusive lamentation founded on a profound sense of multiple displacements working out in geographical *and* inner-personal ways.

Fanon’s classic work *Black Skin White Masks* yields greater insight to Moses’ dismemberment. In it, Fanon gives voice to the distinctive brand of psychological violence facing individuals and communities of African descent who find they are living in a world that communicates whiteness as social norm. Drawing on personal experience in the psychological field Fanon sets out to describe the origins of an inner-dislocation. The psychopathology of the black child is

113 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:295; Meyers, *Exodus*, 41; Andiañach, *Éxodo*, 62.

114 Calvin, *Commentaries*, 56.

115 Sarna, *Exodus*, 13. Siebert-Hommes sees a different connection with Genesis, the echo of the Isaac-Rebekah narrative (Gen 24). As in that story, a major element of this tale is suspense surrounding the vitality of the son. As with that story, so now the reader learns that yes, the son *does* live (v. 22). *Let the Daughters Live!* 122–123.

an exceptionally complicated matter. This is because they have grown up in a world coded *by* Europeans. Societies create cathartic outlets for aggression in the ways they craft stories like those of Tarzan, child explorers, and comic book heroes. The world of such sagas is crafted by and for the white world. This is a world strewn with simplistic dualisms in which villains are dark people and the victorious protagonists are fair-skinned.¹¹⁶ Naturally, the black child identifies with the rugged, young, white adventurer or missionary always foiling the plots of the enemy natives or Arabs.

With maturity and experience the black individual comes to realize that they indeed share the identity of Africans and an internal battle ensues.¹¹⁷ This psychological turn relegates blacks to a zone of nonbeing, not only in their external society, which at every turn find ways to alienate them, but also in the inner reality of their psyche. Such fragmentation is for Fanon, the source of untold anguish.¹¹⁸ This interior conflict Fanon calls a “psychoexistential complex”.¹¹⁹ In despair, the psychologically disembodied Moses anticipates the way Fanon would later describe his own estrangement as straddling “Nothingness and Infinity.”¹²⁰

Thus the naming of Gershom reveals Moses’ sense of dislocation. The phrase can be read to indicate that neither Egypt nor Midian is suitable for Moses.¹²¹ He was (in Egypt) and is (in Midian) a sojourner.¹²² Moses may not be merely identifying a place in the distant “there” (Egypt), or speaking retrospectively about his time in the immediate Midian. He is possibly meaning to go beyond the obvious to qualify his resident alien status with a descriptor that bears deeper psychological dimensions. In this vein Kaiser offers the possibility that the text’s שֹׁמֵם is the adjectival form of שָׁמַם (“to be desolate, removed from contact, cut off from life”) and therefore qualifies Moses’ operative clause by inserting the idea of isolation (“lonely stranger”).¹²³ Ellison reasons that Moses, like the resident alien population as a whole, is more tolerated in Midian than he is embraced.¹²⁴

116 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 141–146.

117 Ibid., 148.

118 Ibid., 116.

119 Ibid., 12.

120 Ibid., 140.

121 So Ellison, *Exodus*, 13. Cf. Wong, “The Birth, Early Life, and Commission of Moses,” 147.

122 Calvin, *Commentaries*, 56.

123 Kaiser, “Exodus,” 313; Chadwick, *Exodus*, 42; Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life*, 18; Meyer intensifies the emotion to include depression. *Exodus*, 31.

124 Ellison, *Exodus*, 13. Keil and Delitzsch echo this sentiment, characterizing Moses’ time in Midian as “a banishment and a school of bitter humiliation.” *The Pentateuch*, 1:434.

It is best to affirm the phrase's multiple meanings than to lay claim to singularity. Moses' life experiences are all identified in his sentiment.¹²⁵ The land of estrangement is Egypt (with Goshen) *and* Midian.¹²⁶ Moses is lamenting his non-status in Egypt. He may also be lamenting a diminutive social and religious standing as a dependent member among the Midianite people.¹²⁷ In the opening lines of Exod 3, Moses is tending the flock of his father-in-law, not his own.¹²⁸ This scene undoubtedly foreshadows the guidance of a future flock belonging to yet another superior.¹²⁹ The utterance of the name is not, therefore, a moment of joy in the narrative, but rather elocution of acute restlessness.¹³⁰

This final interpretation comes closest to the preceding context of Exod 2, where Moses suffered a double rejection (v. 14). In the naming of Gershom, Moses expresses that he is not only dislodged from both Egypt and Goshen, but also from the hybridic middle and from the self. It is not simply the land that is foreign, but now also Moses is foreign. A closer look at the key clause (גר הייתי בארץ נכריה) will reveal the magnitude of his distress.

The Disruptive Combination of גר and נכרי

Moses' explanation of the name, גר הייתי בארץ נכריה ("I have been a resident alien in a foreign land"), is rather puzzling. What perplexes the reader is the fact that the words at the clause's opening and closing move in starkly opposite directions. While גר designates an integrated member of Israelite society, the

125 Meyers comes closest to articulating the comprehensive nature of the naming, stating, "The firstborn child of Moses thus provides a link with the ancestor stories, symbolizes the status of his people, indicates the way his parents met, and anticipates how the entire people will depart from Egypt—all in a name." *Exodus*, 46.

126 Waldemar Janzen proposes that the inconclusive land designation is intentional. At first glance, it is clearly meant as the present Midian. On further reflection, however, the reader recognizes that the better fit is Egypt. For as the First Testament regularly recalls: *You were aliens in the land of Egypt* (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 23:7). *Exodus*, 49. Similarly, the reference to Egypt can be found with the use of "slave" in Deuteronomy (5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22).

127 Osborn and Hatton, *Handbook*, 48. So FRCL has "I have become a refugee in a foreign country."

128 Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 205. Gorospe also recalls this to be a feature of the Jacob-Laban narrative in which the former requests to leave and the latter offers wages for work, indicating non-payment for several years.

129 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 222.

130 Ackerman, "The Moses Birth Story," 106.

נכרי classification suggests otherwise. An examination of meanings brings this point to light.

The first word of the bracket is rich with significance. Basic usage for the verbal form גור denotes simply the act of sojourning. Early in the biblical material it is applied to Abram who is forced by famine “to sojourn/stay” in Egypt (Gen 12:10). Usage is a bit ambiguous (as the translations reflect). There is flexibility of meaning to allow for Abram’s status as a traveler through Egypt, or as a more sedentary dweller, or perhaps as one who performs a mix of both. This variance is owed to the fact that the term can refer to perpetual journeying or to quasi-permanent dwelling.¹³¹ It may even refer to the act of sojourning brought on by displacement and thus be applied to individuals akin to refugees (Isa 16:4). As an infinitive construct (לגור) it takes on the active meaning “to sojourn,” or as BDB puts it, the act of dwelling “for a (definite or indef.) time.”¹³²

In its nominal form, the גר is one who simply dwells or sojourns in a land not pertaining to him/her, essentially a traveler who may occasionally put down roots. As such, the גר may be a non-native (Exod 12:19) with no kinship ties to the land’s inhabitants. BDB’s entry is appropriately comprehensive. The גר is principally a “sojourner, temporary dweller, new-comer (no inherited rights).”¹³³ But the First Testament does not reserve the term solely for those of non-Israelite ethnicity traveling/dwelling in a land. The term is also applied to the *Israelite* traveler who sojourns in another tribe’s land (see Judg 17:7; 19:1, 16; 2Sam 4:3; 2Chr 15:9; 30:25). One can therefore exist as both Israelite and גר.

In other instances, however, the word is used to speak of commonalities (e.g. Exod 12:49; Lev 16:29–34; 17:15; 18:26; 24:16, 22; Num 9:14; 15:13–16; see further Lev 17:8, 10, 13; 20:2; 22:17, 21; Num 19:10) and co-responsibilities (Lev 18:24–30; 20:1–5; 24:16, 22; Num 19:10–13) shared between the Israelite citizen (אזרח) and the resident alien in mostly cultic scenarios.¹³⁴ The word is used in a more universal fashion to figuratively describe human conditions of frailty and vulnerability.

131 For example, Abraham resides for many days in Philistine lands (Gen 21:34). Elsewhere Moses stays in Gerar; here the text denotes a more continuous state of dwelling (Gen 20:1; cf. 28:4; 32:4; 35:27; 37:1; Exod 6:4; Ps 105:12–15).

132 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 157. For instance, the book of Ruth begins with a reference to a certain man and his family who are forced by famine “to sojourn” (לגור).

133 Ibid., 158.

134 Rolf Rendtorff, “The *geær* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 81–84.

Koehler and Baumgartner's translation, "to dwell as alien and dependent," hints at the fragile circumstances endured by the figure.¹³⁵

For instance, according to Ps 39:12, to be among the גרים means weakness. The psalmist writes, "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien (גר), like all my forebearers" (see 119:19). In the same vein, David identifies himself as a גר in his farewell prayer. Describing the kind of disadvantaged position faced by such individuals he proclaims, "For we are aliens (גרים) and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope" (1 Chr 29:15). Remarkably, David's prayer extends גר status from Israel's historical past, forward into their present identity. What both Ps 39 and 1 Chr 29 point to is the גר status of Israel's progenitors.¹³⁶ In the time before Israel galvanized into a nation, the ancestors themselves lived as aliens. According to both texts, it would seem that no Israelites are exempt from such a status.

The most direct statement linking the life of the גר with severe difficulty comes from the mouth of God, who forecasts the fate of Abram's offspring. Abram's descendants "will be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years" (Gen 15:13). The Israelites' status as גרים is paralleled with their status as slaves that shall be oppressed. Nevertheless, God understands the inherent difficulties in such a life and so vows, "I will be with you" (Gen 26:3).

The term נכרי is ordinarily used to describe persons or circumstances that are unfamiliar, unknown, or strange.¹³⁷ The term may also point specifically to

135 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:184.

136 The word is used of Abraham (Gen 12:10; 17:8; 20:1; 21:23, 34; 23:4; 35:27), Lot (Gen 19:9), Isaac (Gen 26:3; 35:27), Jacob (Gen 28:4; 32:4; 37:1), and of the ancestors in general (Exod 6:4; 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 23:7).

137 Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 649. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:701. Job laments his own estrangement in his house (Job 19:15). The psalmist employs נכרי to describe the feeling of being estranged from family members (69:8; cf. Eccl 6:2). God's work is described as strange (Isa 28:21). The term is used even to denote wild flora (Jer 2:21). Verbal forms may refer to one's conduct. In the concluding chapters of Genesis, the word is used to indicate that Joseph, having recognized his brothers who have traveled to Egypt for provisions, "treated them/acted as, a stranger" (HtD וייתנכר; Gen 42:7). Here it is unclear whether the sort of treatment doled out by Joseph is simply a feigned unfamiliarity, or whether the clause also reflects some pre-defined imperial policy for dealing with ethnic migrants. What is clear is that Joseph will consider them outsiders for the time being. Siebert-Hommes traces the use of the word to denote *strange* women (see 1 Kgs 11:2, 8; Prov 2:16; 7:5; Ezra 10; Neh 13). *Let the*

ethnic foreigners, that is, non-Israelites. A notable example is found in Deut 17:15, which establishes that Israel's eventual king be chosen from among the Israelite brethren and not be a foreigner (אִישׁ נָכְרִי) "who is not your brother." Deuteronomy later prohibits the charging of interest to fellow Israelites but does not extend such a courtesy to one who is נָכְרִי (23:19–20; see further 15:3; Lev 25:45). A similar philosophy of ostracism is behind Exod 21:8 where the text prohibits the selling of an Israelite maidservant to a foreign people (לְעַם נָכְרִי). Exod 12:43 instructs that the children of such outsiders are to be barred from the Passover offering, although one who is נָכְרִי may be otherwise included once they have joined the community of faith (1 Kgs 8:41–43; Isa 56:3).

Elsewhere the foreigner (נָכְרִי) is more overtly denigrated and considered an enemy. Foreigners are undesirable and unscrupulous persons. For instance, a clearly pejorative usage can be found in Judg 19:12 in which the foreign city Jebus is bypassed by travelers in lieu of the Israelite Gibeah. Psalm 144:7 captures the lament of a poet seeking deliverance from the tempests of perilous waters and, literally, "from the hands of foreign (נָכְרִי) children." A few verses later the same construction is used to describe this group as those "whose mouths speak lies, and whose right hands are false" (144:11). The word is also found in cultic settings to describe foreign gods, usually in contexts that disparage their existence (Gen 35:2–4; Deut 31:16; 32:12).

Furthermore, it is common for נָכְרִי to appear with זָרִים/זֶרֶם ("to be a stranger/strangers").¹³⁸ Both terms are deployed in tandem to denote peculiar behavior,

Daughters Live! 126. For a thoroughgoing discussion of the term, see Michael Guttman, "The Term 'Foreigner' (*nokri*) Historically Considered," *HUCA* 3:1–20.

138 Like one who is נָכְרִי, a זָר (singular form) can sometimes be someone who is simply "other" without national identity connotations. For instance, the Psalter mentions זָרִים generically as a group which is characterized by a lack of regard for God and so persecutes the Israelite writer (54:3 [MT 5]). However, like נָכְרִי, the word may also be used pejoratively of those either outside the Israelite family system, or of an uninvited/unassimilated outsider. Deut 25:5 describes the זָר as someone who stands outside the Israelite family system as a stranger. The injunction insists that a widow with family ties is to continue her deceased husband's name by engaging in relations with her brother-in-law and not a "stranger" (זָר). Although the זָר is an outsider who is not to be trusted in marital bonds (or in loan dealings, see Prov 11:15), he/she could be of benefit if their aggression results in the plunder of the wicked (Ps 109:11). The word is also used of strangers (זָרִים) who tryst with an adulterous wife (Ezek 16:32). Wisdom literature further uses the word in the context of extolling the young man to not follow after the loose woman. Rather, the learner is to heed the advice by drinking from his own well, an image that is suggestive of intimacy with his lawful wife, and not sharing her with strangers (זָרִים, Prov 5:15–17). In cultic contexts, it is used to describe illicit deities (Ps 44:20; 81:9) and the disastrous act of loving strange

as when Isa 28:21 uses them to describe the way God will reverse course by coming *against* Mount Perazim and the valley of Gibeon (see 2 Sam 5:17–21 and Josh 10:10). The words are also used to convey adversarial qualities. Speaking of individuals, Prov 5:10 describes the folly that comes upon the child who departs from wisdom by following after the wayward path of the loose woman. Part of the punishment will mean that strangers (זרים) will rob the learner of strength and his work will go to the opportunistic foreigner (נכרי) (see 2:16). Likewise the זרים and נכרי are those who take the people's inheritances and homes (Lam 5:2). They dispossess the people and become instead the ones who feed, till, and dress vines on property that rightfully belongs to God's community (Isa 61:5). Moreover, זרים and נכרי are used to denote enemy nations (Jer 30:8; Lam 5:2; Ez 28:7; see further Joel 3:17). They are sinister entities that conquer the holy city, even casting lots for it (Obad 1:10).

Thus the First Testament usually uses נכרי, to refer to that which is *negatively* peculiar. Overwhelmingly, the balance of Israel's use of נכרי (and זרים) convey at the very least disenfranchisement, unfamiliarity, and strangeness. The term is regularly used to describe ethnic foreigners or strangers dwelling in proximity to Israel. Typically, they are seen as menacing figures, present in moments of national turmoil. These are dishonorable, corrupt, and imminently dangerous individuals or groups, such that they "represent threats to a family's prosperity, good name, and survival over time."¹³⁹

The most interesting composite is not the punning combination of גר and שם to make "Gershom." Rather, what is most remarkable is the disjunctive pair-

gods (Jer 2:25; cf. 3:13 where the word is still used to denounce worshipping other gods, but the subject is presumably a temple prostitute). Finally, the זר regularly appears as an outsider and is therefore often excluded from Israelites or assimilated resident aliens in the Pentateuch's legal material (Exod 29:33; 30:33; Lev 22:10, 13; Num 1:51; 3:10; 38; 17:5; 18:4; 7). In other places, the word also carries more precise political meanings. It is used to describe ethnic foreigners that Israel will serve in a foreign land (Jer 5:19), and employed to designate a destitute foreign palace (Isa 25:2). Elsewhere, the word is put in parallel with the wicked, who punish Israel on YHWH's behalf (Ezek 7:21; cf. 11:9). Jer 51:51 paints a scene of shame for the Israelites as they ruminate on the ways that the Babylonian strangers (זרים) have entered the holy place of YHWH's house. In portraying the picture of a desolate and estranged Judean society, strangers and foreigners (זרים) are said to devour the land in the very presence of the chosen people. The word is used of those who are opportunistically present in the aftermath of Judah's demise (Isa 1:7). Joel's picture of a restored Jerusalem is one in which strangers (זרים) are categorically excluded from passing through (Joel 3:17 [4:17]; cf. Hos 7:9; 8:7 Isa 29:5; 61:5; Jer 30:8 51:2; Lam 5:2 Ezek 11:9 16:32; 28:7; 28:10 30:12; 31:2; Obad 1:10; Job 15:9; Ps 54:5).

139 Christopher T. Begg, "Foreigner," *ABD* 2:829–830.

ing of גר and נכרי of the narrator's explanation. What the foregoing definitions bring to focus is that Moses' self-identification through the naming event cannot be favorable. The sudden and unexpected use of נכרי¹⁴⁰ pulls against the more munificent meaning of גר. To be sure, these words denote difference within the same semantic field; but they exist as polarities. They refer to outsider figures, but in antonymous ways. The words conflict.

Those who are גרים enjoy protection, inclusion, and patronage within the fold of the majority culture. For they have disassociated themselves from their homeland. As established members of the community, albeit with limited rights and responsibilities—and prone to suspicion¹⁴¹—they reside *within*. Conversely, a land characterized as נכרי is not a place of comfort and rest for the גר. Those considered *nokri* remain “linked to the land of origin.”¹⁴² These are people tagged by their own foreignness. The strange/foreign territory is a despised and dangerous place filled with outcasts and outsiders who are more than unfamiliar. The space of the נכרי is occupied by threatening figures.

The use of these opposing terms evokes the conflict at work within Moses in the confrontation episode. Included as גר but shunned as נכרי, Moses is an insider *and* an outsider both in Egypt *and* in the Midianite territories. He once lived as an outsider among Egyptians and now feels himself an outsider among his new family. By vocalizing this divided mental landscape, Moses finally makes known his overpowering sense of brokenness.

Conclusion

Following his marriage and inclusion into the Midianite clan, Moses' naming of Gershom is a shocking development. One might expect Moses to feel finally

140 Siebert-Hommes notes that the expected construction ought to be גר שם (a sojourner there) or גר בארץ הזו (a sojourner in this land). *Let the Daughters Live!* 124.

141 The verbal form occasionally appears in instances where the topics are aggressive acts like attacking, quarrelling, or stirring up strife. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1:185; Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 158–159. For example, Isa 54:15 couples the infinitive with the imperfect (גור יגור) to describe anyone who may stir up trouble (גור). See further Ps 56:7; 59:4; 94:21. The word may also be used in contexts that communicate fear or the condition of being afraid (Deut 18:22; Job 41:17). In an interesting instance in which the sense of force is watered down, the NRSV translates the imperative form of Ps 22:23 as “stand in awe of him” (וגורו), whereas TNK offers the more emphatic clause, “be in dread of Him.” The use of the root in these ways underscores the conflicted nature of resident alien status.

142 Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 125.

at ease. After all, Reuel willingly transcended normative boundaries in the creation of an exogamous marriage.¹⁴³ Reuel's act of hospitality stands against the inhospitable actions of the Egyptian monarch who cares nothing for the positive contributions of the Joseph clan. It is Moses' benevolent behavior, not his ethnic alignment as an Egyptian, that generates Reuel's invitation.¹⁴⁴ The Midianite leadership is open, giving, and ultimately faithful to YHWH (Exod 18:1, 9–12).¹⁴⁵ But the weight of such charitable behavior seems an ancillary matter for Moses. He is consumed with his own despair. The decentered Moses employs נָכַר to disparage the lands of his refuge. In so doing, he betrays the embrace of Reuel. He self-segregates. The irony is that despite being accepted, he is unwilling or incapable of fully receiving such kindness. Most tragically, he is incapable of self-acceptance.

This disruption is also sensed when the two naming events bookending the chapter are compared. The naming by the royal daughter captured the duality of Moses' complex existence and presaged the exodus event. That was a story of salvation and addition; this is a story of depletion, reduction, and subtraction. Unlike the first naming, this second instance is marked by sadness and loss. Moses does not yet realize the promise associated with existing in a hybridic stasis. The women of the earlier narrative elided naturally into a middle space. They managed to exist and function as intercultural agents. Moses tries and fails to occupy a similar position. In the rejection of his Hebrew kinsman, Moses is suddenly lost.

Now amidst an alien people, in an alien land, and as an alien himself, he senses the full fracture of this fissure. Though installed into the Midianite clan, he remains unable or unwilling to rest in that soothing solace. His inclusion among the Midianite people is residual of his prior inclusion as a babe. And yet in neither setting is Moses settled. Although tagged with difference by the daughters (who identify him as an Egyptian), Moses cannot yet see the positive dimensions *of* that difference.

Something more profound than homesickness, homecoming, or hoped-for future is afoot. Though externally Egyptian and re-socialized as Midianite,

143 Copher, "The Black Presence in the Old Testament," 155–156. Cf. Num 12 where Moses marries a Cushite, or Cushan, woman. The parallel with Cushan and Midian in Hab 3:7 suggests another Cush locale in Midian.

144 Leveen, "Inside Out," 400.

145 Against this interpretation, Enns over-reads the marital bond as an indication of a coming eschewal. He does not consider it a moment of inclusion but as symptomatic of a future forsaking. He writes, "The theological significance of this foreign marriage seems to highlight Israel's rejection of her deliverer (v. 14)." *Exodus*, 83.

in “Gershom,” Moses overwrites his inclusion with exclusion.¹⁴⁶ The reader witnesses Moses’ conflicted demise of self. He is not at peace.¹⁴⁷ The Moses of the story feels himself enclosed in a labyrinth of non-existence. In Fanonian terms, Moses is confined to a “zone of nonbeing.”¹⁴⁸ The dual displacement (Israelite/Egyptian) is tripled as Moses fails to step into a middle-space and now quadrupled as he rejects himself. Paradoxically, it is his lack of identity that *becomes* his identity.¹⁴⁹ Moses disappears.

146 The troubled naming of Gershom stands in contrast to Joseph’s naming of Ephraim (Gen 41:52). Fox reasons that in that instance Joseph names his son to mark the joy of having lived in a land of oppression and misfortune. See *Now These Are the Names*, 25. It stands to reason that Moses’ naming of his son moves in the opposite direction. The joy once felt by an exuberant Joseph is *not* the joy experienced by Moses. As an outsider, Moses cannot glory in Joseph-esque positionality. The stories of Moses and Joseph are inverted by virtue of Exod 2. Waldemar Janzen sees a similar reversal between the characters. Janzen points out that Moses went from court to shepherd, while Joseph went from shepherd to court. *Exodus*, 49.

147 Goldingay makes the point that the entirety of his life is lived as an alien. Even the fact that Moses is denied entrance into the Promised Land further cements his transience. *Exodus and Leviticus*, 13. So also Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 177. Lange, *Exodus, Leviticus*, 6.

148 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 8, 139.

149 Motyer, Propp, and Gorospe come closest to this sentiment. For Motyer Moses “seems to have ‘come to the end of himself’ and accepted the nonentity and proper obscurity of a failure.” *Exodus*, 41. Propp conceives of chapter 2 to be a tale of identity crisis wherein the hero discovers he is *still* a stranger. The naming event commemorates a life lived as a stranger. For never does Moses find home, neither in Egypt, Midian, or the wilderness. He dies mere miles from the promised territory. *Exodus 1–18*, 176–177, 221. Gorospe examines the liminal—by which she means transitional—nature of Moses’ identity in anticipation of her more detailed study of Exod 4. *Narrative and Identity*, 165–168.

Identity Reconstruction: YHWH's Avowal of Liminality (Exodus 2:23–3:15)

Introduction

The story of Moses' multiple displacements is momentarily suspended as God attends to the brokenness of the Israelite community (2:23–25). Their despair moves God both to cognitive and corporeal action. God is not content to merely reward human resistance (e.g. midwives). God now moves to affect an undisguised confrontation with empire. Moses is to become the vehicle of this more substantive clash.

The revelation episode carries both future and present dimensions. On the narrative horizon are the liberation events which culminate in the Israelite flight and jubilant Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18). But the divine call includes more than a migration event. Moses is himself on the threshold of something beyond a new vocation. Only now, as his understanding of self lies in tatters, can a fresh identity be possible. Moses' crushing loneliness is under negotiation. For Moses what follows is more than commission. The discovery of God's name does more than relate information. Moses' encounter with God will be an invitation to reassess the depth of his pain in positive ways and to positive ends. For Moses the moment of revelation is one of reorientation and redemption.

Identity En Route to Renewal: The Divine Incursion and the Discordant Sign of the Fiery Bush (Exodus 2:23–3:3)

2:23 And it came to pass after those many days that the king of Egypt died. The children of Israel groaned on account of their labor, and they cried out. And their cry for help went up to God on account of their labor. 24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. 25 And God saw the children of Israel, and God acknowledged.

3:1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, priest of Midian; and he led the flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb,

the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "Let me now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn."

Exod 2:23–3:3

In verse 23 we receive favorable news that is sure to signal a new beginning for the long-suffering Hebrew laborers and the self-exiled Moses. The ascension of a new king, though not stated expressly, is implied.¹ Such an affair is a delicate political matter that regularly leads to the reconfiguring of social and political power throughout the kingdom. Extra-biblical evidence records that newly installed rulers, fearful of revolt, often mitigated possible threats by granting amnesty, releasing prisoners, and setting slave forces free (e.g. Ramses IV).² The tragedy here is that despite the death of the Egyptian king, the installation of a successor, and the expected beneficence sure to result, the lot of the Israelites goes unchanged.³

The anguish of the working masses is finally transformed into voice. For Brueggemann, this is not a time for modest propriety, silent waiting, or the maintenance of worshipful distance. No prim etiquette is exercised: "The Exo-

1 Most commentators begin a fresh unit at 2:23. I have followed this convention. Alternatively, Ackerman makes a compelling argument for considering 2:23–25 a conclusion for chapters 1 and 2. "The Moses Birth Story," 106–114. Likewise, Goldingay considers this passage a summary of the story to this point, not an account of the rise of a new ruler. *Exodus and Leviticus*, 13. Meyers considers it an addendum to the Midianite unit. Meyers, *Exodus*, 46. Durham calls it a postscript. Durham, *Exodus*, 24–26. Greifenhagen cites elements in 2:23–25—the reference to the ancestors, the reappearance of "sons of Israel," and the mention of God's knowing, echoing Exod 1—as indicative of an *inclusio* which delineates chapters 1–2 as a literary unit. *Egypt*, 69. Houtman distinguishes verses 23–25 from chapter 2 and from 3:1–4:19, calling verses 23–25 both an introduction to chapter 3 and an intermezzo between chapters. *Exodus*, 1:326. Greenberg understands the verses as both climax of the introductory unit and prelude to the coming scene. It is therefore a bridge between the units. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 55, 57.

2 Sarna, *Exodus*, 4; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 13.

3 The reader senses the tone of expectation even on a lexical level. Cassuto notices that the narrator again designates the underclass population with the familiar and filial בני־ישראל in opposition to Pharaoh's use of the ignominious "Hebrews" title in the preceding material. *A Commentary*, 28. Siebert-Hommes understands בני־ישראל as important for the creation of structure in Exod 1–2. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 54; cf. Siebert-Hommes, "But If She Be a Daughter," 72. Brueggemann sees the בני־ישראל designator as evidence of the narrative's becoming "theologically self-conscious." Brueggemann, "Exodus," 706.

dus process begins with a raging cry of self-assertion.”⁴ The people dare to speak “on account of” their labor.⁵ The clause in question (שׁוֹעֲתִים אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבָדָה) (וְתַעֲלֵ) is not suggestive of petition. The cry of the people lacks the expected direct object (e.g. Exod 22:23, 27). No protracted national repentance is in view. No sermons address God. “They scream into the void.”⁶

Not unlike the eruptive activity of the Midianite daughters (2:16), the present but “unobtrusive”⁷ God springs to life in the space of four verbs (v. 24). These verbs coincide with the four terms of anguish in the previous lines (v. 23). The reader finally glimpses the divine consciousness. A full twenty-five verses have transpired since the last instance of a verb that was connected with God (1:20). Now the God who was once content to multiply the families of two midwife resisters can no longer stay away. The anthropomorphic tenor of the response further indicates the personal and paternal investment of God in the salvific project. God is neither absent nor lacking in personality.⁸ In ascending parallelism, the first and third verbs capture sensation, while the second and fourth communicate mental activity.⁹ God is not pronominalized as the subject of the successive verbs of action. Rather, God is named as subject in every reference. The effect adds intensity¹⁰ and anticipation to the theophany that follows.¹¹ Together the alliterative quality of the words conveys permanence and presence.¹² It is indeed אֱלֹהִים that responds.

The response of God is itself founded on the previous promises. God remains committed to the ancestors. The lexicon of divine activity is familiar from Genesis. The self-consistent God is accustomed to hearing (Gen 16:11, 13; 21:17 twice; 29:33; 30:6, 17, 22), remembering (Gen 8:1; 9:15–16; 19:29; 30:22), seeing (Gen 1; 6:5, 12; 11:5; 18:21; 22:14; 29:31–32; 31:12, 42), and knowing (Gen 3:5; 20:6; 22:12).

4 Ibid., 707.

5 Propp suggests the מִן carries a double meaning: “because of” and “out of.” The latter is an allusion to the coming exodus. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 179.

6 Ackerman, “The Moses Birth Story,” 108. Against this, see Num 20:16; Deut 26:7.

7 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 47.

8 Pixley, *On Exodus*, 15.

9 Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 54; cf. Oswalt, “Exodus,” 299.

10 Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 42. So also Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot 1* (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization, 1976), 19, 22. Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life*, 18–19. Jacob notes it too, adding that it is meant to prepare for the revelation of the deity as YHWH. Jacob, *The Second Book*, 46.

11 Meyers, *Exodus*, 46.

12 Greenberg posits that the effect resembles that of “a tolling bell.” *Understanding Exodus*, 55.

First of all, God is sensitive. More than simply perceiving sound, God gives heed.¹³ The hearing of Israelite groaning then animates God to mental activity.¹⁴ But God's remembrance/mindfulness (זכר) is not merely cerebral work. זכר is more than a reference to divine awareness; it is likened to volitional perceptiveness. זכר denotes active attentiveness to a prior obligation.¹⁵ It bespeaks "loyalty and constancy."¹⁶ In the third verb, God returns to perceptive sensitivity. Eyesight recalls more than visual recognition. The use of ראה in Exod 1 and 2 never indicates innocuous gazing. The seeing is associated with acts of compassion and pity.¹⁷ God does not remain content to merely notice exploitation. To see is to consider and to move.

Finally, God is said to "acknowledge" (ידע).¹⁸ As with 1:8, the reuse of ידע denotes more than simple cognition. The omission of an object in the final clause of the chapter ("and God acknowledged") leaves matters indeterminate. The LXX adds "them" (as do NRSV, ASV, NASB, KJV, NCV, NIV), pointing to the previous object (בני־ישראל). God acknowledges the Israelites. Conversely, the analogous language of 3:7 supplies a different object. There God knows the people's sufferings/affliction.¹⁹ Still other commentators maintain that the omission functions rhetorically to heighten suspense²⁰ or to urge the reader toward reflection, spurring them to search for the object in what follows.²¹ The lack of acknowledgement with which chapter 1 began (1:8) is reversed in the final words of chapter 2. The unwillingness of Pharaoh to recognize the Joseph group does not dull the readiness or capacity of God to do so.²²

13 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 2:1571–1572.

14 Propp notes the awkwardness of verse 24 with 25. It is expected that memory would follow hearing and sight. *Exodus 1–18*, 179.

15 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 48. So also Sarna, *Exodus*, 13; cf. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 179.

16 Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, 49.

17 Siebert-Hommes sees chiasmic dimensions. *Let the Daughters Live!* 56–57; cf. 90–91 for a summary of the verb's appearance in Exod 2–4.

18 See *Ibid.*, 91–92 for a summary of the verb's appearance in Exod 3–15.

19 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 48–49. Siebert-Hommes, *Let the Daughters Live!* 91.

20 Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 54.

21 In this vein, Brueggemann offers that conceivably, "we are left to imagine what God knew. God knew that these slaves were connected to the people of Genesis. God knew that promises were yet to be kept, requiring powerful intervention. God knew, because of old memories, abiding promises, present pain, and audible groans. God knew and so had to act." *Exodus*, 706–707; cf. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 180.

22 Davies considers this reversal a "contrasting inclusio." *Israel in Egypt*, 172.

The thematic threads introduced in 2:1–22 are hard to overlook. Like the baby's crying in verse 6, so now the nation cries. As Pharaoh's daughter showed compassion, so now God will show compassion. Just as Pharaoh's daughter saw the basket among the reeds and the child within, so also God now sees the people. Just as she heard the baby's crying and took pity, so God hears and is moved to compassion.²³

Similar connections may be drawn with the younger Levite daughter. As she stalks the box from afar, so God will also watch the people from afar. As she waits silently in the distance, so God awaits the arrival of Moses to Horeb (3:1). As Moses' sister daringly speaks the plan for life to Pharaoh's daughter (v. 7), so YHWH will speak another life-preserving plan in what follows. Just as the child's sister spoke boldly, without invitation, and for the protection of life, so God offers an unsolicited response en route to the call narrative and holistic life beyond.

God, one might imagine, has been an attentive pupil taking copious notes of the life-saving actions performed and attempted. Indeed, the references to YHWH as midwife (Ps 22:9–10; 71:6) convey God's commitment to the preservation of life.²⁴ Perhaps for these reasons, Benno Jacob considers the figures of chapters 1 and 2 to be representative of a human "e-lo-him,"²⁵ though perhaps the converse is equally true in the remainder of Exodus. The actions of the saving God emulate the actions of human saviors.

The opening of chapter 3 abruptly places Moses back in the center of the reader's consciousness²⁶ as the tale transitions from the heavenly realm to the rural setting of Midianite life. Installed among the Midianites, Moses is given a job. The opening participle of 3:1 (רעה) suggest Moses is engaged in continuous action. Though inwardly dejected, his external inclusion is complete. Moses is an ongoing fixture in the community with responsibilities befitting his role. As such he tends to the flock.

23 Binz notes that chief among the connections between Pharaoh's daughter and YHWH is her act of mediation and the mediation YHWH will perform in the future. *Exodus*, 15–16. The symmetry between God and the royal daughter is further evidence that she is not being ridiculed in the narrative (see discussion above).

24 See L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71," *RevExp* 105 Fall (2007): 761–775; cf. *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

25 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 47.

26 Cassuto notes how the subject (Moses) comes before the predicate. *A Commentary*, 30.

The geographical reference to wilderness (מִדְבָּר) signals complex and transformative capacities. In the First Testament, the wilderness is a place of extreme variability. It conjures instances of danger,²⁷ disorientation,²⁸ animal wildness,²⁹ frightening numinous beings,³⁰ rebelliousness,³¹ punishment,³² evil and temptation,³³ and at times represents a threat to cities/nations.³⁴ Though archetypal of disunities of space, time, and primal chaos, the wilderness is sometimes a place of new beginning, transformation, and passage from one mode of being to another.³⁵ At times it conveys blessing, safety and provision,³⁶ flourishing,³⁷ along with worship and commitment,³⁸ and theophany.³⁹ For it is in the wilderness that God dwells (Exod 5:1–3; 8:25–28; Judg 5:4–5).

The phrase in question, אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר, is careful to designate the scene as happening “beyond the wilderness.” To venture “beyond” evokes more than territorial location. Moses does not enter a new physical landscape that is somehow not-wilderness. Such a reading might erroneously lead one to surmise that Moses transcends the many connotations bound up in wilderness experiences (see above). Clearly that cannot be, since what follows will be profoundly transformative. Though seemingly counterintuitive, to venture “beyond the wilderness” is to enter an *extremely* rural and desolate place, a place that is in some way “more-wilderness,” not less. It is a locale, therefore, of *heightened* potential. Moses does not only travel past normative geographical boundaries, he traverses into a new, uncharted space. Moses enters a place (physically and metaphysically) that captures his present disorientation and is also imbued with tremendous possibilities. It is a place where such possibilities exist in intensified ways.

27 Exod 16:3; Deut 8:15; Jer 2:6, 31; 4:11–12; 51:43; Job 24:2–9; Isa 21:1.

28 Exod 14:3; Ps 107:40; Job 6:18; 12:24.

29 Exod 23:29; Isa 30:6; 34:9–15; 35:9; 43:20.

30 Isa 13:21–22; 30:6; 34:8–15.

31 Exod 14:11; 16:2–3; Num 27:14; Ezek 20:13, 21.

32 Num 14:32–33; Deut 9:28.

33 Lev 16:22; Jer 3:2; Isa 43:20; Ps 95:8–9.

34 Isa 13:19–22; 14:17; 27:10; 64:10; Jer 9:11; 22:6; 50:12; Zeph 2:9.

35 Neh 9:9–21; Pss 78:12–41; 106; Ezek 20:33–38; 36:8–12, 33–36; Hos 2:14–20; 12:9; Isa 35; 40–55; Jer 23:7–8; 31:7–12, 31–34; 32:36–41. See Brian C. Jones, “Wilderness,” *NInpDB* 5:849.

36 Gen 21:20–21; 37:2; Num 14:22; Exod 16:14; Deut 2:7; 8:15; 32:10; Lev 23:34–36; 1Sam 23:14; 26:2–3; Jer 9:2; 48:6; Ezek 34:25–28; Ps 55:6–8; Hos 2:18–19.

37 Isa 35:1; 41:18–20.

38 Exod 3; 5:1; 7:16 8:27; 19–20; 1Chr 21:29; 2Chr 1:3.

39 Gen 22; 1Kgs 19; Gen 28:10–22; 32:22–32; 16:7–14; 20:15–19.

The wilderness, like the Nile's transformation,⁴⁰ is undergoing its own rearrangement in the narrative. What began as a place of abject fear and despair into which Moses ran, is about to become one of hope. The place beyond the wilderness comes to epitomize the renewal to be sparked within Moses. Rich with meaning, it—like Moses—engenders complexity. The wilderness is for Moses a locus where he will wrestle with, and evaluate the status of, his immediate predicament and developing identity. It is here, in the most distant terrain, that Moses will experience ultimate redemption.

Suddenly, an angel appears in a bush in the midst of a flame.⁴¹ Deferentially, the text indicates that the angel (who is YHWH, vv. 4, 6) calls out.⁴² For Moses, the anomaly of the unconsumed bush bewilders and amazes. As one presumably accustomed to the region's foliage, Moses encounters something entirely unexpected. The sight of a non-consuming flame means that the natural world is suspended in favor of the supernatural.⁴³ He must turn to see. Actually, Moses looks twice (vv. 2–3) at this unusual sight. The first looking inaugurates an inner monologue and the commitment to also “turn aside.” Interestingly, in both verses 2 and 3, the image of the envisaged deity does not catch Moses' eye. It is the status of the bush that captures his attention.

A critique of Mosaic discernment may be at work. The clear sight of Pharaoh's daughter (2:6) and that of God (2:25) is suspiciously absent in Moses. As in the story of his looking “this way and that” in which Moses could not “see” the consequences of his actions, he is here incapable of seeing the total picture displayed before him. While he looks, and even turns aside to look more intently, Moses still does not see. So also Moses' inability to recognize the angel may be illustrative of Israel's disconnection from God that followed the death of the Joseph generation (1:6).⁴⁴

The scene is redolent of Eden⁴⁵ and also anticipates future fiery episodes (Exod 9:23–24; 13:21–22; 14:24; 19:18; 24:17; 40; 38). But the appearance of fire

40 We recall from the above discussion the entangled nature of the Nile. Once a place of death (1:22), it is redeemed into one of possibilities and life in the birth narrative (2:1–10).

41 For other appearances, see Gen 16:7–14; 19:1; 21:17; 22:11, 15; 31:11–13; 32:1; Judg 6:11–14; 13:21–23.

42 The phenomenon of the messenger that both represents God and *is* God is employed as a precaution to preserve the distance between the human and divine. This feature anticipates Judaism's reticence to reference God directly and physically. Propp, *Exodus* 1–18, 198; Meyers, *Exodus*, 52.

43 Enns, *Exodus*, 97. Additionally, Enns considers this scene of natural suspension to foreshadow future scenes of natural suspension in the plague narratives. Enns, *Exodus*, 97.

44 Dozeman, *Exodus*, 126.

45 Longman notes that the use of vegetation—namely trees—as in the garden, is symbolic of

in the present context carries rich and powerful meaning of its own. Fire is in many ways an emblem of the multiplicity of divine energies. Fire frequently accompanies God's presence,⁴⁶ guidance,⁴⁷ combat,⁴⁸ covenant-making,⁴⁹ and sacrifices.⁵⁰ Fire and smoke are evocative of fright-inducing danger,⁵¹ judgment,⁵² and awe.⁵³ Immaterial and indefinable, fire is formless and lacks texture. Theologically, the image foreshadows what will be plain in the giving of the divine name: freedom and power. Thus Lange sees the burning bush episode as a scene of control. God manipulates and governs that which is most unwieldy.⁵⁴ For Andiñach, fire also points to transformative capacity. It is invaluable for accomplishing the mundane tasks of daily life (cooking, hardening mud, generating warmth) but it also possesses destructive and purifying capabilities.⁵⁵ The multiple qualities of fire contribute to a lack of consensus surrounding the particular symbolism of the burning bush. Interpreters, ancient and modern, exhibit a wide array of perspectives.⁵⁶

life. Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Exodus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 102.

46 Gen 3:24; Exod 19:18; 40:38; Deut 4:11–12; Judg 13:20.

47 Exod 13:21–22; Num 14:14; Neh 9:12, 19.

48 Exod 14:24.

49 Gen 15:17.

50 Exod 29:18, 25, 34, 41; 30:20.

51 Exod 19:18; 24:17; 30:20. In some texts, God's presence is referenced as a "devouring fire" (אֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת). Deut 4:24; 9:3; cf. Lev 10:2; 2 Kgs 1:10, 12, 14; Jer 4:4; Ps 79:5; Zeph 3:8.

52 Gen 19:24; Exod 9:23–24; 32:20; Dan 7:9–10; Ezek 1:13–14, 27–28.

53 2 Chr 7:1–3; Ezek 1.

54 Lange, *Exodus, Leviticus*, 10.

55 Andiñach, *Éxodo*, 66; cf. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, eds., "Fire," *DBI*, 286–289.

56 Following Philo and Exodus Rabbah, some read analogously with the material of chapter 1. As the thornbush is ablaze but not consumed, so Israel is protected from full destruction by the Egyptians. See Philo, *Philo Volume VI: On Abraham. On Joseph. Moses 1 and 11* (trans. F.H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), 311; *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (trans. S.M. Lehrman; London: Soncino, 1983), 55; cf. Sarna, *Exodus*, 14; Meyer, *Exodus*, 44–45. Caesarius of Arles understands the fire to be the Holy Ghost and the bush and thorns as the "hard, haughty Jewish people." See Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 3, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 12. Midrash reads the bush as symbolic of Egyptian cruelty or of God's affection for lowliness, meant to model humility (see Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, 55–60 for excerpts). Similarly, Lange, *Exodus, Leviticus*, 9. Gispén reads the fire as a substance symbolic of Israel's sanctification. *Exodus*, 52. Erdman understands the scene as representative of Moses' self-assessment. Though seemingly insignificant (like the bush), he is indwelt with divine strength (the flame). *Exodus*, 28.

Such dissonance invites postcolonial observations as well. The burning bush image, which has bedeviled exegetes as a problematic, seizes on the interplay of multiplicity and incongruence. The narratives of the midwives, Pharaoh's daughter, and that which is developing in Moses serve to valorize variegated mixtures. The midwives, employed and beholden to the deified Pharaoh, sabotage him in secret. The monarch's daughter, so close to the origin of the death decree, showed life-saving compassion. The Moses tale develops more slowly but is bound for a similar result (more on this below). Dogmatic binaries, on the other hand, are more than divisive; they are oppressive. Authenticity exists for those who navigate the mixed space. The bush is just such an image. Simultaneously verdant and ablaze, earthy and numinous, natural and unnatural,⁵⁷ in its glow discordant realities coexist as an alluring whole. The image reaffirms with certainty that motley mixtures *can* coalesce as beautiful and paradoxically dissonant unities.

For Moses, the crushing sadness that gave rise to "Gershom" is under critique. Though estranged from himself, there is still hope. The myriad of his identities need not be relegated and isolated to oppositional extremes. They may yet cohabit the same space. Thus the bush comes to represent more than a vehicle for winning the shepherd's attention. Incompatibility is presented as something attractive and appealing. Such radiance is a virtue of the divine personality to be more richly encountered in the ensuing dialogue.

Identity Disputed: Divine Assurances and Moses' "Who Am I?" (Exodus 3:4–12)

3:4 When YHWH saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him from the midst of the bush, and he said, "Moses, Moses." And he said, "Here

Oswalt posits that the bush is an invitation for Moses to become indwelt with the divine fire. "Exodus," 308. Houtman considers the agricultural resiliency of the thornbush to be a source of appreciation and admiration among desert communities who saw in it elements of divinity. *Exodus*, 1:340–341. He also takes the non-consumptive fire as symbolic of God's overflowing kindness, 344. For a thorough summary spanning early Jewish and Christian perspectives through to contemporary secular thinking, see Scott M. Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 45–61.

57 Propp considers the sign of the bush as indicative of a changing relationship between God and created order in which God intervenes more directly. This theme continues in the coming signs (water to blood, light to darkness, sea split, torrent from rock, mountain in flames). *Exodus 1–18*, 222.

I am.” 5 Then he said, “Do not come closer, remove your sandals from your feet. For the place upon which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 He also said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God. 7 And YHWH said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry on account of their oppressors. For I know their pain, 8 and I am come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. 9 And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to me. I have also seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 Come now and I will send you to Pharaoh, to lead out my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt.” 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should lead out the children of Israel from Egypt?” 12 And he said, “I will certainly be with you, and this will be the sign for you that it is I who have sent you. When you have led out the people from Egypt, you all will serve God upon this mountain.”

Exod 3:4–12

Having captured Moses’ attention, the celestial figure is poised to speak. The double personal call of Moses, as elsewhere (Gen 22:11; 46:2; 1 Sam 3:10), elicits a familiar response: “Here I am” (Gen 22:1, 7, 11; 27:1; 31:11; 46:2; 1 Sam 3:4–6, 8, 16; God replies similarly in Isa 52:6; 58:9; 65:1). The instruction to remove sandals, like the symbol of the bush, is intricate. Culturally, the removal of footwear is a sign of respect⁵⁸ and servanthood,⁵⁹ and is symbolic of poverty and humility,⁶⁰ humiliation in defeat,⁶¹ and mourning.⁶² It is used for positive ends as a sign of leadership confirmation (Josh 5:15) or as an act of hospitable invitation, since bared feet is reserved for honored guests (Gen 18:4; 19:2; Judg 19:21; 1 Sam 25:41; Matt 3:11).⁶³ In cultic settings it is practiced among worshippers wishing to appear before the deity without clothing. For fear of defilement, one must remove remnants of dead animals before entering the sanctuary.⁶⁴ In the

58 Sama, *Exodus*, 15. Ellison, *Exodus*, 17. Ashby, *Exodus*, 20. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 57.

59 Lk 15:22, 65.

60 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 40.

61 2 Chr 28:15.

62 Ezek 24:23; 2 Sam 15:30.

63 J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 28–29.

64 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:351.

current text, the stipulation to remove sandals introduces the first in a series of boundary-talk elements. Here, as elsewhere in Exodus, maintaining distance is vital (Exod 19:12; 20:18, 21; 24:1; 34:3) lest one make a sudden and perilous intrusion into the divine presence.⁶⁵ Moses is put on notice.

Once the obedient Moses meets the conditions of the messenger, words of historical connectedness are the first that emanate from God (v. 6). The fourfold use of אֱלֹהִי heightens emphasis. The deity is delivering credentials. The theophanic introduction comes initially with personal and corporate familial notes. The singular “father” refers both to Moses’ biological origins (2:1) and, by extension, to his life in Egypt. If the deity knows his father, then surely the fiasco in Egypt is also known. The subsequent reference to the ancestors creates historical continuity with Genesis, conveys God’s trans-generational constancy, and suggests the coming fulfillment of those promises, while also recalling the opening genealogy of Exod 1 and serving as a reminder to Moses of his Israelite heritage.

However, the point of verse 6 is not that Moses is inexorably Israelite.⁶⁶ Rather, the remark exists to produce an initial and seminal association meant to capture Moses’ attention ahead of the coming revelation. Thus the historical comment serves simply to reaffirm that the itinerant Moses retains his membership among those who he thought had rejected him. The words of God contrast and reverse the previous rejection (see 2:14). Verse 6 indicates that

65 Kaiser, “Exodus,” 315–316.

66 So Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 42; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 221; Fox, *Now These Are the Names*, 17. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 196, 206–207, 217, 222. Gorospe sees the rite of circumcision in chapter 4 as the pivotal moment of transformation. The death threat forces the identity crisis to a resolution. It is circumcision that ties Moses (and Zipporah) to the covenant, distances him from Jethro, and thus finally settles the identity question outright. Moses is an Israelite. Similarly, Sonia Kwok Wong’s exegesis of identity, which covers 2:1–4:18 (not chapter 1), sees in the final verse of the unit a resolution of the identity issue. For Wong, recovery of his Hebrew identity is essential to the narrative’s goal of qualifying Moses as the *Israelite* leader. Moses is “primordially,” a Hebrew. Wong intimates that the author does not realize the ways in which Moses’ multicultural background make him into a hybrid character. “The Birth, Early Life, and Commission of Moses,” 139–155. For Fretheim, Moses’ painful experience of sojourning, which he feels in the Midianite territory, connects him to the suffering of the Israelites. By virtue of this suffering, he becomes an Israelite. *Exodus*, 42. Greifenhagen argues, unconvincingly, that the plural “you” in תַּעֲבֹדוּן (you all will serve)—coming as a reply to Moses’ “Who am I?”—is YHWH’s way of tying him to Israelite roots. *Egypt*, 81. However, Greifenhagen also notices ambiguities of identity, especially in the circumcision tale that follows. He deems these “possibilities of identity,” representative of the story as “a site of ideological contestation.” *Egypt*, 85.

Moses is no longer adrift. The utter isolation captured in his naming of “Gershon” is again under censure. Despite his anguish, Moses’ sense of self remains yoked to the Israelite people. The reader is left to assume that Moses is struck by the initial address, for he is drawn to finally look away, presumably for fear of death (Gen 16:13; 32:30).⁶⁷

Verses 7 and 9 reiterate the assertion that God sees the Egyptian oppression. In verse 7 God makes Moses aware of what the narrator has already made clear to the reader. As with 2:24–25, God hears and sees; though the order of verbs is reversed, the impact is made with the emphatic construction *ראה ראיתי* (“I have surely seen”). God is aware and intimately connected. These are “my people.” In both 2:24–25 and 3:7, the appraisal of divine emotion is concluded with a statement of knowing. However, the thing known in verse 7 is here made explicit (as opposed to 2:25). God knows their *sufferings* (*כי ידעתי את־מכאביו*).

Verse 9 begins with the forceful, “and now” (*ועתה*). For a second time the Israelite cry, disconnected and undirected, comes to God nonetheless (see 2:23–24). The only difference from the preceding reference (v. 7) is that here in verse 9 the Egyptian culprit is named for the first time. The thing God sees is extended beyond the suffering of the Israelite people. Now God trains God’s eyes on the source of that oppression, the Egyptians themselves (v. 9). All of Egypt faces the indictment. The nature of the offence (*לחץ*) is more than simple mistreatment. The word reappears in 23:9 where the issue at stake is the proper treatment of foreigners.⁶⁸

Verse 8 represents the crux of the matter. With language reminiscent of migration, the plan comes into focus. God moves downward in advance of taking the people up into the Canaanite lands (Exod 3:17; 12:38; 13:18; 32:8; 33:12; see further 32:8; 33:12). Quite literally Egypt is geographically low while Canaan is mostly mountainous.⁶⁹ But this is more than a topographical note. To hear the cries of the people, God must incline an ear downward in a move of involvement and commitment. This again is another descending movement, like that of Pharaoh’s daughter at the Nile, and that of God in the Babel tale (see discussion above). Pharaoh’s daughter drew Moses up, and YHWH will do likewise. As in those instances, God here bridges the distance to humankind. For a third time, the coming down imparts benevolence. God stands poised to do battle against illicit authority, for “hand of the Egyptians” is suggestive of power.⁷⁰

67 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 56.

68 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 202.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

The land into which Israel is to enter is broad, evoking “amplitude and freedom of movement in contrast with the shackles of Egyptian slavery.”⁷¹ Its distinguishing features are twofold. First, the land is a place of extraordinary diversity, given that it is inhabited by Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Second, the familiar metaphor of pastoral and agricultural abundance, “milk and honey,”⁷² is an echo of the reproductive fertility of the preceding chapters (1:7, 12, 19–21; 2:2, 16, 22). The reference, as interpreters point out, is puzzling given that the land itself is rather inhospitable.⁷³ Though the clause exists as a utopian exaggeration, the point is perhaps to match the land with the reproductive capabilities of its would-be inhabitants.

Switching to the imperfect verb tense, verse 10 indicates a future set of events. Like Reuel, God extends a new invitation. As the cries of Israel have come to God, so now Moses will come to Pharaoh. The possessive pronoun appears for a second time on the lips of the divine agent (v. 7). The people are no longer the LXX’s cold “them” (2:25). The sterile pronoun is discarded for one that is more personal. The Israelites are now God’s very own people (עַמִּי).

Verse 11 contains the first of Moses’ eight objections (see 3:13; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:22–23; 6:12, 30). The initial protest conforms to the self-abasement formula.⁷⁴ It particularly reflects his dislodged and dislocated identity. Not unlike the tragic naming of Gershom, his simple “Who am I?” carries deep significance. The question is likely to convey a healthy reluctance. Other biblical figures are equally disinclined (1 Sam 18:18; 2 Sam 7:18; 1 Chr 17:16; 29:14; 2 Kgs 8:13; 2 Chr 2:6; see further Judg 6:14–17; 1 Sam 9:21; Jer 1:6). For most interpreters, the source of Moses’ reluctance is a timidity and sense of inadequacy stemming from self-awareness of unworthiness.⁷⁵ Others see little more than an expression of meekness and humility.⁷⁶ Still others understand “Who am I?” to be a retort

71 Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 74.

72 Most likely an image of agricultural plenty, “milk and honey” may also allude to the food of the gods in their paradisaical habitations. A summary of views can be found in Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:356–359.

73 Because of the inauspicious character of the land, Houtman reads the description as one of latent possibilities. It is not that the land is already productive, but that the land *will* yield prosperity. *Ibid.*, 1:356–357.

74 See G.W. Coats, “Self-Abasement and Insult Formulas,” *JBL* 89 (1970), 14–26.

75 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 36; Kaiser, “Exodus,” 318; Erdman, *Exodus*, 29; Cole, *Exodus*, 68; J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 31; Ashby, *Exodus*, 22; Bush, *Notes*, 49; Longman, *How to Read*, 103; Motyer, *Exodus*, 65; Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:440–441; Ben Meir, *Rashbam’s Commentary*, 33.

76 Davies, *Exodus*, 70; Enns, *Exodus*, 100; Jacob, *The Second Book*, 61; Cook, *Exodus-Ruth*, 13.

based on his lack of status and affinity with the downtrodden Israelites.⁷⁷ The submissive Moses simply shrinks away. Prophetic call-stories feature similar apprehensiveness, as when Isaiah laments on the grounds of his uncleanness (Isa 6:5), or Jeremiah hesitates on the basis of his youth (Jer 1:6).⁷⁸ Thus Moses' "Who am I?" question is founded on a fundamental and innate sense of unpreparedness.

These assessments sketch an incomplete picture by overlooking the force of the inquiry with respect to the strife operating within Moses since 2:14. They rightly identify a dearth of self-confidence but fail to detect the reason for this sense of deficiency. While Moses is reluctant, this is not simple reluctance. While Moses is humbled, this is not simple humility. Though modest, this goes beyond modesty. According to F.V. Greifenhagen, the inquisitive response can be read in light of identity politics to communicate an inward uncertainty.⁷⁹ "Who am I?" is a personal reflection based on Moses' very conflicted selfhood. Moses is not merely inadequate to the task, nor is he just acutely aware of human frailty or exercising evasiveness for its own sake. Neither is he simply voicing an implicit refusal.⁸⁰ Something more far-reaching is at work.

"Who am I?" comes after the reference to "father" and the ancestors (v. 6). Moses is dissatisfied with that answer. It is Moses' second question set in the context of a hypothetical scenario, "If I come to the Israelites ... and they ask me, 'What is his name?'" (v. 13) that reveals the double intent of the first question. The "Who am I?" is an obdurate response to verse 6 and leads Moses to the "Who are you?" inquiry. Again, it is identity that is at issue. Though uncertain of his own, he is nonetheless curious about the bush's. This tension exists also in what goes unsaid. Gone is the double use of "brethren" (2:11). Moses responds to the angel's claim of familial connectedness by self-distancing. He designates the people as the "children of Israel" and not by repeating God's intimate language.

The reluctant and detached Moses seems to purposefully omit the עמי of verse 10. This exclusion is noteworthy but not unexpected. He has already been rejected outright by those he considered his (2:14), and has also rejected himself (2:22). They are no longer his kinfolk; neither can he be counted among them. The scar of his rejection at the hands of the Hebrew remains with Moses. And

77 Pixley, *On Exodus*, 19; Sarna, *Exodus*, 17; J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 31; Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 49.

78 Richard Coggins, *The Book of Exodus* (EC; Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2000), 17.

79 Greifenhagen, *Egypt*, 81.

80 So Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:361.

as with his rejection of hospitality in “Gershom,” so now Moses is rejecting the angel’s explanation.

Like the question of the previous chapter (2:14), this is a rhetorical inquiry with an existential flavor. Moses’ “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should lead out the children of Israel from Egypt?” (v. 11) can only be answered with the unexpressed but implicit, “No one!” Moses proves stubborn, remains introspective, and persists in his boldness. The subtext of his reply claims, “I am not an Israelite because I am nobody!” “Who am I?” makes sense only in light of the tangled, contentiously intertwined, and vexing nature of Moses’ still developing selfhood. In his question Moses again surrenders the self. Notwithstanding, the form of a question creates room, however little and unexpected, for a genuine answer. The question can be read with an air of candid curiosity. Perhaps there is yet the prospect that the bush can render words of clarity.

God refuses to answer the question in a direct fashion but opts to retort with a dual promise of presence and the forecasting of a final event (v. 12). The assurance to be with Moses is reminiscent of other such instances (Judg 6:16; Jer 1:8). The clause is again emphatic (כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ) and also plays on the coming אֶהְיֶה of the formal revelation (Exod 3:14). But more importantly, it speaks into the crushing disorientation Moses has made clear in the previous chapter. Though Moses is dejected and left utterly estranged from others and from self, God’s promise of presence seeks to create a connection.

Here though, the promise functions as a guarantee, not only of simple attendance, but to remain committed. God does not tritely disregard Moses’ assessment of self-brokenness. God accepts Moses’ deficiencies and counters with the promise to be with him.⁸¹ These pledge words stand in contradistinction to the quick and cruel disassociation of Pharaoh (2:15a) and point forward to the coming reply (v. 15). The still burgeoning identity of Moses is tied to the burgeoning identity of the bush.

The sign of the deity’s presence will come retroactively, only at the conclusion of the exodus event (v. 12).⁸² Only when Moses returns to the mount of revelation will he have confirmation of God’s commission. For Moses, this is cold comfort. He is clearly dissatisfied by God’s anachronic sign of providence.

81 Motyer, *Exodus*, 65–66.

82 Also possible: the near demonstrative of verse 12 (זֶה) refers to the present experience of the bush or to the coming interaction with Pharaoh (v. 10), rather than to a future episode on the mountain. Sarna, *Exodus*, 17; cf. Meyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 49–50. Meyers posits that the language is intentionally ambiguous. *Exodus*, 56.

The use of עָבַד in the closing clause of verse 12 is telling. Not only does the word mean “serve, work, labor,” but it is also glossed as “worship” (e.g. NRSV, ASV, NIV, CEB, CEV). Maintaining the former in translation preserves symmetry with the word’s appearance in chapter 1 (vv. 13, 14). The latter, however, indicates that the Israelites will exchange service for Pharaoh for worship of God. Responsibility to Pharaoh and the aims of empire will dissolve as responsibility to YHWH begins to materialize.

Identity as Enduring Fragmentation: Moses’ Continued Re/Dejection (Exodus 3:13)

3:13 But Moses said to God, “Behold, if I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they say to me ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Exod 3:13

The rhetorical question of verse 11 generated the presence reply of verse 12 but also engendered another implicit question (v. 13). The precise nature of the query (as with the response) has been variously understood. Outcomes range from Moses being merely inquisitive, to submissively pragmatic, to harshly cynical.

First, Moses perhaps seeks simple information. He understands that gods possess many names. Moses seeks to know which epithet—existing or previously used—accompanies the current disclosure. Because names are often evocative of characteristics, functions, reputation, and capabilities (more than being merely labels), the question may also wish to uncover which specific attribute comes with this new revelation (see 6:3).⁸³ In short, what are the intentions of the entity making these promises? Benno Jacob notes that the curious construction of the question (מִהְיֵאֱמֹר) seeks after more than simple conveyance of the title. For Moses to question with the use of מִהְיֵאֱמֹר is meant to ascertain the nature of God’s responsibility to the Israelites.⁸⁴

It is the essence of God that is at issue, not the title for God per se. Moses’ inquiry, therefore, has little to do with the common title for God. He aims to know the essential nature and qualities of God in order to further reveal God’s objectives for the coming mission. The people will wish to know the

83 Cook, *Exodus-Ruth*, 13. So also Cole, *Exodus*, 69.

84 Judg 13:17; cf. Gen 24:23, 47; 27:18, 32; 32:30; 48:8; 1 Sam 17:55.

name's meaning in light of their present circumstances.⁸⁵ Moreover, given the polytheistic milieu of the Egyptian setting, it seems reasonable that the request is for Moses' own sake as well. Because "God of your father" is a common ANE appellation used of pagan divinities, Moses calls on the deity to individuate.⁸⁶ Which god, among the pantheon of gods, are *you*?

Second, Moses may question out of a fundamental faithfulness to the plan. In this vein, the question obeys a certain practical logic. Perhaps the Israelites have indeed forgotten the god of their ancestors.⁸⁷ Any re-engagement in dialogue with them will require complete information. The willing Moses is pragmatic. Thus the question is sincere in that it is partly intended to garner proper credentials (see 4:1). How can Moses represent the Israelites if he cannot first substantiate the facts of the encounter? Armed with such knowledge Moses will be better-suited to corroborate the truth of his special and intimate relationship with God.⁸⁸

Another interpretive route sees Moses as an opportunist. Though awed by the bush and humbled by the demand to remove his footwear, Moses detects a chance to reestablish control. Armed with intimate knowledge of Egyptian theology, he understands that gods and Pharaohs possess various names, some public, some private.⁸⁹ Though reconnected with his Israelite lineage by the bush, Moses still computes with the logic of his upbringing. The request to know the name makes clear his enduring connection to Egyptian cultural and theological norms. The positing of a hypothetical scenario is a distraction tactic meant to fool the deity. Not unlike the fear-mongering Pharaoh before him, the vehicle for such a ruse is the construction of a hypothetical scenario (1:10). The request is a play for power by which Moses tries to discover the secret name for his own personal benefit. After all, if the people do not know the name, it is unhelpful to ask for their sake.

85 Kaiser, "Exodus," 320. Against this, Childs cites Gen 32:27 where the nearly identical sentence construction simply elicits the name of Jacob. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 50.

86 Sarna, *Exodus*, 17.

87 Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 37.

88 Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:366. Enns argues that the force of the encounter is weakened if Moses is discovering the name for the first time. The dialogue is meant to assure Moses that this is now the deity he has already heard of. *Exodus*, 105–106.

89 In a departure from most interpreters, Exodus Rabbah argues that the secret name is meant to serve as proof for the Israelites, in advance of Moses' testing. Only with the secret name, known only to his kinsmen, can Moses corroborate the truth of his encounter. So also Motyer, *Exodus*, 68. Propp argues that the name Moses seeks functions like a password or shibboleth. Moses knows the name but tests the voice to determine that it is in fact Yahweh who is the God of the ancestors. *Exodus 1–18*, 223.

There is no reason to select one of the above options over all others. Each is a viable, albeit incomplete, possibility. What is missing from the above readings is proper attention to the deep conflict taking shape in Moses. More appropriate to the context, his question takes on greater significance in light of his underclass, disaffected, and Othered existence. Here again a postcolonial perspective attenuated to the formation of identity sees in the question of verse 13 more than a curious, pragmatic, and exploitative individual. The context indicates that at its core, Moses' question is framed in the language of extreme social anxiety, personal dejection, and fear of further rejection. Moses in exile remains, as ever, dislodged.

A clue to this disaffection is found in the fact that Moses is concerned about the *Israelite* response to the news he may bring (see 4:1). Moses does not question the logistical impossibilities inherent in the plan. Nor does he seem troubled by the possible legal repercussions brought about by the murder he committed. As I have argued, he is foremost a person without a stable identity. The commissioning bush, with its reference to the ancestors, exacerbates this fragility by placing him again under the auspices of the Israelite community, the gatekeepers of his bygone stasis. In Moses' thinking, they will surely resist his attempt at reintegration. The initial rejection was difficult enough (2:14). A second encounter opens Moses to greater psychological torment. Can he stand to be scorned yet again?

A close reading of his question reveals elements of still deeper unease. As he frames the announcement scenario, his use of the second person pronoun serves to distance Moses from God and from the Israelites. Moses is careful to avoid the panoptic "our" in favor of the second person "your" (the God of *your* ancestors). Not even in the purely imaginative space of the hypothetical scenario does Moses dare number himself among the Israelites of his ethnic background. As with his omission of עמי in verse 11, Moses does not risk naming this God as his own. The dejected Moses rebuffs the inclusive God. Moses cannot claim communal fidelity with the people of his background. Neither can he with this God.

Moses goes as far as putting words into the mouths of the Israelites. They will respond with "What is his name?" (v. 13). In his thinking they will not question his return, his murderous background, or his whereabouts. They will only wonder about the deity's name. The people, so Moses thinks, care nothing for him. They will respond to the facts of the case with no regard for Moses whatsoever. As he envisions the scene unfolding, he relegates himself to the margins. In Moses' own thinking, a return trip to Goshen will do nothing to reverse his invisibility.

Identity as Divine and Human Hybridity: YHWH's Redefinition of Crisis and the Redemption of Moses (Exodus 3:14–15)

14 And God said to Moses, "I will be who I will be." And he said thusly, "You shall say to the children of Israel, 'I will be has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations.'"

Exod 3:14–15

Having remained open to the polyvalence of the question (v. 13), I consider the answer it elicits with similar openness (vv. 14–15). The only closed avenue is that of absolute ontology. Interpreters are nearly unanimous in their assertion that God's puzzling *אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה* does not indicate the pure being of philosophical or metaphysical abstraction. Such a view is based on the LXX translation (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν), which is congenial to Greek dualisms but overlooks the monistic nature of Hebraic anthropology.⁹⁰ This general consensus aside, the meaning of the name has generated an encyclopedic amount of divergent outcomes.⁹¹ Most readings cluster around three key possibilities: mystery, freedom, and active presence.

Most agree that whatever the precise meaning, the form of the reply as a phrase rather than as a proper personal name reflects a certain caginess. The answer Moses receives is not a name. If, as is often postulated, Moses' question is founded on Egyptian magic, then at its root the answer is an evasive maneuver (see Gen 32:29; Judg 13:17–18).⁹²

Specifically, the form of the reply is in the intentionally ambiguous *idem per idem* syntactical construction in which the relative pronoun links matching principal and subordinate clauses (Exod 4:13; 16:23; 33:19; see Gen 43:14; 1 Sam

90 See Noth, *Exodus*, 45. So also Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, 64; Ashby, *Exodus*, 22–24; Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 52; Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 23; Bruckner, *Exodus*, 45. Childs is more accommodating of ontology, but only if it is paired with an abiding emphasis on the activity of God. *The Book of Exodus*, 88.

91 For a brief summary of interpretations in rabbinic literature and early Christian sources, see Langston, *Centuries*, 61–63; cf. Lienhard, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 19–23. Though dated, Childs' discussion and rather extensive bibliography are illustrative of the complexity surrounding verse 14. *The Book of Exodus*, 60–77.

92 Notably, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1936).

23:13; 2 Sam 15:20; 2 Kgs 8:1; Esth 4:16; Ezek 12:25).⁹³ The *idem per idem* convention is utilized in argumentative discourse to cease debate and create closure, once and for all.⁹⁴ Thus Fretheim characterizes the vagueness of the name as capturing a certain circuitousness. He explains, "Wherever God is being God, God will be the kind of God God is."⁹⁵ There is an enigmatic and undefined quality to the name. Its ambiguity may obfuscate in order to convey that all which can be known is that not all can be known. The name is a kind of dead end.

It is also possible that the name's ambiguity may seek to conceal the vast potential of God's personality and future activities. In either scenario (dearth of information vs. promise of overwhelming amount of information), God's *modus operandi* reflects a basic refusal to be coerced or controlled. The elusive riposte is intended to put Moses in his place. No title can imprison the fullness of the divine persona.

Yet it is not enough to say that the bush simply withholds the name in an effort to thwart coercion. The cryptic reply prevents hyper-revelation but also counts as revelation in its own right. The preservation of mystery means therefore that God possesses ultimate, absolute, and un-derived independence.⁹⁶ What Moses can know is that "I will be who I will be," like the image of the bush, is non-contingent, without limitation, self-sufficient, self-generating, self-dependent, self-defining, and self-sustaining. This entity, utterly inscrutable, is free to operate and therefore supremely omnipotent. This God is eternal, incomparable, and unpredictable. The inexhaustible God remains totally uninhibited to act. For his part, Moses will need to believe that this non-answer is itself enough to live with.

This reply is not, however, pure mystery and unfettered freedom but rather mystery and freedom en route to fuller revelation predicated by presence. While the name may lack ultimate clarification, it is not without substance. God's double use of the imperfect (אֶהְיֶה) accords with the word's singular appearance in verse 12, thus suggesting the future tense, "I will be who I will be" over the more common declarative "I am who I am" (NRSV, NASB, NIV, ESV,

93 Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 225; Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 76-77; cf. Graham S. Ogden, "Idem per Idem: Its Use and Meaning" *JSTOT* 53 (1992): 107-120.

94 Jack R. Lundbom, "God's Use of the Idem per Idem to Terminate Debate," *HTR* 71 (1978): 193-201.

95 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 63.

96 Notably, J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 34; Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:442; Binz, *Exodus*, 23; Erdman, *Exodus*, 31; Motyer, *Exodus*, 70; Longman, *How to Read*, 104; Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 52.

CEB).⁹⁷ The phrase conveys presence by speaking of internal consistency and coming commitment (see 4:12, 15; 6:7; 29:45). Whoever this God is and however this God will behave, will be marked by faithfulness to God's self.⁹⁸

This is a God of more than simple existence. The name expresses the *abiding* presence of *active* resolve.⁹⁹ This is a promise that God acts and will act.¹⁰⁰ If God's name means presence as personal and active manifestation, then God's identity will become clear in the multiple scenarios of the developing story. The name in verse 15, in light of verse 12, is a radicalization meant to emphasize God's presence with Moses as continuing indefinitely.¹⁰¹ The identity of God is inextricably tied to the events of the exodus. Repeatedly, the Bible recalls that YHWH is the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 20:2; see further 16:6; 19:4; 20:2; 32:4, 8; Lev 11:4; 19:36; 22:33; 25:38; 26:13; Num 15:41; Deut 5:6; 13:5, 10; 2 Kgs 17:36; Ps 81:10).

The deity, with fullness, openness,¹⁰² and fluidity, will be for Moses and Israel what is needed, when it is needed. G. Henton Davies captures the comprehensive promise thusly: "I AM *who and what, and where and when, and how and even why you will discover* I AM. I am what you will discover me to be."¹⁰³ Any number of possibilities are available to this deity. While Moses is not given the details he so longs for, he is called into a trusting relationship with, as Motyer puts it, the "omnicompetent" God.¹⁰⁴

The contributions of the foregoing traditional evaluations are deserving of proper esteem. They sensitively attend to the name's depth of nuance. But my approach moves beyond them by appropriating the helpful language postcolonial theory to analyze the nature of the revelation with greater precision. The giving of the divine name, more than a statement of mystery, freedom, and

97 See Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 204–205. Against connotations of past or future tenses in the name, see Durham. For him, the reply conveys continuing and "active existence" *only* in the present. *Exodus*, 39.

98 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 63–65.

99 Notably, Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 76; Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* (CBC; London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 23; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 135; Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 24–25; Gispén, *Exodus*, 55; Cole, *Exodus*, 70; Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, 64–65; Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 149; Kaiser, "Exodus," 321.

100 For Childs, each of the objections (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10) is based in past experience, while each of God's replies is future-oriented (3:12, 14; 4:5, 11–17). *The Book of Exodus*, 72.

101 Andriánach, *Éxodo*, 84.

102 Waldemar Janzen recalls that this is not unfettered openness. God has a clear plan in mind. Though there are possibilities, the overarching goal remains. *Exodus*, 65.

103 Davies, *Exodus*, 72.

104 Motyer, *Exodus*, 69.

presence, represents the climactic and logical denouement of the first three chapters. Because the dominant theme, identity ideology, crests in the disclosure of the name, it must be used as the prism through which other options are more fully appreciated.

The interrelated postcolonial categories of hybridity and ambivalence are especially helpful for achieving this end. They open new possibilities for understanding God and the unit (1:1–3:15) as a whole. These terms (with “mimicry”) are detailed in the discussion of the midwives. What follows introduces the nearly synonymous term, “Third Space,” advanced by Bhabha. It is especially helpful for investigating the nature of God’s self-revelation and its powerful subtext in the pivotal moment (v. 15). It is here that, through the multiple meanings of the “YHWH” articulation, this postcolonial reading sees God as both *redefining* Moses’ identity crisis and, on the basis of that climactic redefinition, *redeeming* him from his overwhelming sense of estrangement.

Bhabha’s explication of “transnational culture,”¹⁰⁵ with his critique of the modern nation and of knowledge as stable and totalizing, resonates with YHWH’s revelation. His central claim is that nation is an idea with its origins, not in authoritative national discourse and ideologies, but in lived social experience.¹⁰⁶ The nation is not a place for homogenizing cultural difference. The notion of nation wrongly rests on “holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity.”¹⁰⁷ The nation should be understood as undecided, experiencing both progress and retrogression, attachment and slippage. It is marked by cultural difference over and against the homogenous ideology of nationhood, and so, it is a place that vacillates, a place of ambivalence.¹⁰⁸

Stuart Hall recognizes similar dynamics at work in his assessment of cultural identity in the Caribbean context. For him identity is framed simultaneously and dialogically by two vectors, that of similarity/continuity, and that of difference/rupture. The first yields a grounding effect, the second that of discontinuity.¹⁰⁹ Thus he defines cultural identity as

105 Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” in *Nation and Narration* (ed. Homi K. Bhabha; London: Routledge, 1990), 4.

106 *Ibid.*, 1.

107 *Ibid.*, 3.

108 *Ibid.*, 2.

109 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman; New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 395.

a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.¹¹⁰

The variable nature of identity that Bhabha and Hall describe is equally true of YHWH. Where verse 15 is at issue, Bhabha and Hall bring to light the Janus-faced and fluid interplay between definiteness and indefiniteness captured in the name.

In the giving of the name, YHWH inventively self-identifies with fluctuation by standing in the border territory between past commitment (to the ancestors) and future allegiance (to the Israelite community). Janzen prioritizes this seeming illogicality as supremely important, saying, "Even deeper than the mystery of absolute freedom is the mystery in which such freedom binds itself (without losing itself) in faithfulness to a particular community to which it has made promises that it now undertakes to fulfill."¹¹¹ The name of God in verse 14 is a creative synthesis between that which is known (3:6, 15) and that which is still undetermined.

It is here, to turn in earnest to Bhabha's "Third Space," that the makeup of YHWH's identity is best understood. Bhabha explains Third Space as the positive outgrowth of hybridity. That is, hybridity is not only a symptom of domination. Neither is it solely a means of resistance via mimicry (as discussed above in chapter 4). Hybridity, when understood as Third Space, takes on richer meaning. Of course, Bhabha does not mean a physical locale but "a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness."¹¹² The indeterminate nature of

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 394.

¹¹¹ J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 34.

¹¹² Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (ed. Jonathan Rutherford; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211. Similarly, see the radically open concept of Thirdspace as articulated in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); cf. Edward W. Soja, "Thirdspace:

the name reflects God's willful entry into the contested, complex, and interstitial space. YHWH here exists between and betwixt, in the midst and in the middle¹¹³ of definite and indefinite extremes. What Sugirtharajah says of Gandhi's hermeneutical activities appropriately captures the present text. It is "rootedness and openness" that are here on display¹¹⁴ and that define the Third Space locus.

It is the complexity of doubled consciousness of hybridity as Third Space—framed in historical and temporal ways¹¹⁵—not reified and restrictive binaries,¹¹⁶ which imprint the divine personality. Hybridity is not itself a fixed ter-

Toward a New Consciousness of Space and Spatiality," in *Communicating in the Third Space* (ed. Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner; New York: Routledge, 2009), 49–61; *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996); more generally, see Soja's earlier work, *Postmodern Geographies: The Assertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

- 113 Isbell notices the appearance of "middle" as a structural signifier used to communicate salvation and deliverance in the life of Moses (2:5; 3:2, 4) in the climactic Reed Sea scene (14:16, 22, 23, 27, 29), and in the subsequent crossing of the Jordan in Joshua (3:17; 4:3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 18). Charles David Isbell, *The Function of Exodus Motifs in Biblical Narratives: Theological Didactic Drama* (SBEC 52; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 105–107.
- 114 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 193; cf. Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 345–347.
- 115 The revelation of the name, as *historically bound* to the memory of the past, resists the de-historicizing, de-materializing, de-temporalizing, and homogenizing tendencies of discourse analysis for which Bhabhian hybridity is regularly critiqued. Notably: Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin; London: Routledge, 1995), 36–44; Stephen D. Moore, "Questions of Biblical Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, or, The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 90–92; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 206. On Bhabha's homogeneity, and further critiques of hybridity, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 2005), 149–153; John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2d ed.; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 261–262; Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley, introduction to *Postcolonial Criticism* (ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley; London: Longman, 1997), 37–38; Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, 143–145; Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 130–151; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 116 On the threat of binary thinking relative to identity formation, see Jonathan Rutherford, "A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Identity: Com-*

tiary position but carries with it generative inertia and capabilities. In Bhabha's words, "It is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge ... Hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."¹¹⁷ This "negotiation" which Bhabha references "is the ability to articulate differences in space and time, to link words and images in new symbolic orders, to intervene in the forest of signs and mediate what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities."¹¹⁸ It does not resolve the tension of identity, which is always split, doubled, and in a sense problematic.¹¹⁹

Bhabha sees culture as existing in the space of the "beyond," defined as "neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past."¹²⁰ Rather "we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."¹²¹ Likewise, identity as defined by YHWH exists as a kind of narrative consciousness that is both malleable and fluid. It is an eclectic and commingled condition that undermines the extremes of Manichean logic.

The paradoxical exchange between stability and instability becomes the chief marker of the divine personality. God's identity, therefore, must be understood not as regressive but as an anti-monolithic, settled and unsettled, incalculably dynamic, accommodative, and at all times embroiled in a hyphenated state as a dialectic (or perhaps a trialectic).

An inverse of 1:8 comes to pass. The call of Moses is a corrective to the first Pharaoh's plot. The monarch's unwillingness to acknowledge the Israelite population amounted to the dissolution of hyphenated status followed by an exploitation campaign founded on exclusivist and assimilationist identity politics. Now YHWH, with a new Joseph as the centerpiece of a new salvation plan, reappropriates and reinstalls multiplicity. Gone are the xenophobic policies of empire. The boundaries of authentic identity, unlike the intractable ideology of Pharaoh, are porous and permeable, open and variable. It is this

munity, Culture, Difference (ed. Jonathan Rutherford; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 9–27.

117 Bhabha, "The Third Space," 211.

118 Bhabha, "Aura and Agora: On Negotiating Rapture and Speaking Between," in *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 8; cf. "Frontlines/Borderposts," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (ed. Angelika Bammer; Bloomington/Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994), 269–272.

119 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 162.

120 *Ibid.*, 1–2.

121 *Ibid.*, 2.

interplay between the definitive and indefinite—the contested Third Space—that becomes the hallmark of God's identity and calls for a redefinition of the Mosaic crisis.

If ambiguity is the distinctive feature of YHWH's self-revelation in Exod 3:15 and this verse is also the climax of the dominant identity theme of the larger unit (Exod 1–3), then here God is not only revealing the divine Self but also re-framing Moses' heretofore conflicted sense of self. In "YHWH" Moses senses the simultaneous redefinition of his identity crisis as well as an instance imbued with redemptive energies. In this dramatic moment of deliverance, Moses arrives at three interrelated discoveries.

First, as outlined above, Moses learns that definitive labels have no place in the persona of YHWH. God's identity is neither fixed nor univocal. To the contrary, God is ever hovering and agile. Second, the indefinite nature of God resonates with his own. The crushing dislocation felt by Moses is, in some sense, the place where YHWH *also* dwells. Divine vulnerability is inscribed in the call dialogue. By it God enters the space of the subaltern. The giving of the name, mysterious as it is, serves as an example of divine vulnerability. The socially disjunctive Moses, excluded overtly from Hebrew and Egyptian contexts and self-marginalized from his newer Midianite one, is not alone. The indeterminate name presents for Moses a moment of connectedness to another that he has not felt in his disjointed past.

We recall that "Moses" echoes "YHWH" as both are composite and linguistically intricate names. Both YHWH and Moses share in a kind of indeterminacy. Both figures are in transition: YHWH from the promises to the ancestors to those for the current generation, Moses from his dejected self-understanding in Midian to his refreshed self-appraisal in Egypt and beyond. For God to be present with Moses means more than faithful attendance. YHWH joins Moses' very ontology. Moses is shocked to learn that God also occupies the undefined space.

Third, by co-identifying under the rubric of indeterminacy God not only joins Moses in the place of his deepest pain, but God also redeems that pain. God's response does not indicate a simple lack of identity.¹²² This kind of identity is not nothingness. It is, as Hall describes the issue more broadly, "*something*—not a mere trick of the imagination." It "has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects."¹²³ Set in the context of

122 Dozeman maintains that YHWH is introduced in parallel to Moses: both are "without a clear identity." *Exodus*, 94.

123 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 395. Along these lines, Sugirtharajah warns against

Moses' identity dilemma, YHWH is using the checkered and troubled history of Moses' life to create in him a new understanding that will finally reverse his shrunken horizon.

What defines YHWH is not just what YHWH accomplishes in historical memory, but what YHWH will do and who YHWH "will be" as an ambivalent, Third Space character in the uncertain and unfolding future. The name offers Moses an opportunity to re-quantify and reconstitute his own dejected self-appraisal. It beckons him to participate in a revision of selfhood, which at base shares in YHWH's chimeric ambivalence and ambiguity. Moses does not die to his conflicted sense of self,¹²⁴ he is awakened to the full meaning of its significance. As Bruckner puts it, "His previous experiences in Egypt and in the ways of the wilderness, although vital to his identity, were not enough. God's presence added to them *was* enough."¹²⁵

While in "YHWH" Moses senses a similar kind of dislocation, the protean quality of the name as hope and promise, based in historical memory and straining into the liberating future, constrains it from slipping into the realm of all-out chaos, estrangement, and loss. If, as Fretheim comments, "God is not only one who is; God is also one who in some sense becomes,"¹²⁶ then perhaps Moses' unorthodox story is similarly unfinished, similarly in the process of becoming. For if the meaning of the name increases with the experience of it,¹²⁷ then so also Moses' self-awareness will increase in richness, depth, and degree.

Moses' story did not conclude in the naming of his firstborn. Nor will it end in the remote Midianite grazing lands. Moses learns that the trajectory of his life, like the unfolding mission of the solidary YHWH, is still in transit. As Said comments on the nature of his own identity, "I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents ... They are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about."¹²⁸ Moses may yet belong, but perhaps not in the ways he is/was accustomed to. Like YHWH, Moses' identity—though no longer a source of grief—will be indeterminate, unstable, diffused, in constant flux, "always out of place."¹²⁹ Albeit destabi-

over-using hybridity as a one-size-fits-all term to characterize all conditions. "Margins and Mainstream," 159.

124 So Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 199–200.

125 Bruckner, *Exodus*, 43.

126 Fretheim, *Exodus*, 15.

127 Jacob, *The Second Book*, 77.

128 Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 295.

129 *Ibid.*, 180.

lized, authentic human and divine identity is unleashed for Moses. Selfhood is redefined holistically under new categories of multiplicity, freedom, and movement.

Conclusion

To borrow from McLeod's reading of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, the YHWH-Moses encounter is fundamentally about the interplay between roots and routes. The crisis in Moses is created by his unflinching fidelity to Israelite rootedness as the needed prerequisite for a stable identity. His disorientation is the result of his need for exclusionary fixity. We most clearly sense this need in Moses' inquiry of disarticulation, "Who am I?"

What Moses learns in the course of the dialogue is that his identity is to be based in the "shifting and mobile relationship between past, present, and future, one that does not presume an even, continuous passage through time but which reconstellates these different moments."¹³⁰ In the pivotal scene, YHWH seizes the opportunity to re-signify Moses' tattered and crisscrossed sense of self with a threefold promise of presence, future mission, and above all, identity reorientation. What Moses rejects are not his anti-Israelite sentiments.¹³¹ Rather, Moses' notion of identity as implacable is under scrutiny. Moses' identity will remain anomalous. It will at all times remain partial, overlapping, and decoupled from deterministic poles. No single identification will suffice, for "all identities are intrinsically coalitional and multi-layered."¹³²

Moses is an Israelite, but he is not simply an Israelite. Likewise he is an Egyptian but not only an Egyptian. So also he is a Midianite but not merely a Midianite. His identity bears an additive and contrapuntal quality. YHWH uses Moses' "polybrid" background to bring about the future plan. Moses' unique upbringing, network of associates, and associations give him voice in royal circles. Who but Moses can win an audience with Pharaoh (5:1)? His relationship to the Midianite people and his familiarity with their terrain will help him accomplish the coming exodus. Who is better suited than Moses to

¹³⁰ McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 249–250.

¹³¹ Greifenhagen discusses the development of identity ideology through the book of Exodus. While he tends to overstate YHWH's desire for ethnic differentiation, he nonetheless identifies Israelite identity as an amorphous and developing *topos* in these early chapters. *Egypt*, 70–79.

¹³² Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 190.

aid YHWH in engineering Israelite liberation? His familiarity with dislocation as tragedy *and* hope will serve the exodus mission well.

In the final analysis, Moses is as YHWH is. Both figures “live happily on the hyphen,”¹³³ sharing in a brand of dislocation and imbrication that must be embraced, not rejected. This fragmentation is reimagined to positive aims and a tremendous future goal. Like the midwives, Pharaoh’s daughter, and now YHWH, Moses is called to step into the unpredictable Third Space, a place in which the topography of the self is reconfigured and remapped. It is a new and exciting site in which variability and travel come to define selfhood. As Spivak states in her keen appraisal of identity, this is a mode for existing in which “one is always on the move.”¹³⁴

133 Doris Sommer, “A Vindication of Double Consciousness,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 176. For more on identity as multiplicity in postcolonial theory see Ashcroft and Ahluwalia’s discussion of Said’s sense of self. They identify his paradoxical dual identity as the dominant thread for their review of his work. See *Edward Said*, 6–30.

134 Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 38.

Retrospect and Prospect: Reviewing Findings and Mapping Contrapuntal Contact Zones in the Remainder of Exodus

Postcolonialism is not simply a physical expulsion of imperial powers. Nor is it simply recounting the evils of the empire, and drawing a contrast with the nobility and virtues of natives and their cultures. Rather, it is an active confrontation with the dominant system of thought, its lopsidedness and inadequacies, and underlines its unsuitability for us. Hence, it is a process of cultural and discursive emancipation from all dominant structures whether they be political, linguistic or ideological ... It is a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between idea and power, which lies behind Western theories and learning. It is a discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial ideologies, imperial attitudes and their continued incarnations in such wide-ranging fields as politics, economics, history and theological and biblical studies.¹

R.S. SUGIRTHARAJAH

Retrospect

Sugirtharajah's robust definition of postcolonialism's oppositional stance understands that power over the biblical text cannot fall to one or limited groups. Those who control the dissemination of the Bible's ideas, themes, and narratives, ultimately shape ontological realities for groups that value it. Interpretation, asserts postcolonial biblical criticism, does not entail the donning of sterilized methodological lab coats, nor is it an undertaking performed out of sheer aesthetic pleasure,² it is in every way a guerilla act.³ For the text, like all

¹ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 15.

² Ibid., 70. See further R.S. Sugirtharajah, "The End of Biblical Studies?" in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 138.

³ I use this word in the sense that Hendricks defines it: "*Guerilla exegesis*, then, is the bringing or leading out of oppressed/suppressed/don't-get-no-press meanings by sabotage, subversion or other non-traditional appropriations of hegemonic renderings, by independent non-conventional means of struggle and attack." "*Guerilla Exegesis*," 76.

knowledge, is contested territory. The Bible is itself a site of defiance and struggle meant to be decolonized.⁴

This book has attempted such a decolonizing move for the opening of Exodus. Central to this argument is the claim that postcolonial thinking, when more authentically attuned to its stated goals, can be quite helpful to understanding the key figures in Exod 1:1–3:15 as embroiled in a deeply textured and intricate web of identity formation. This investigation has utilized postcolonial theory in concert with traditional expository tools and methodologies to de-Orientalize the text in question by squinting for this often overlooked and under-exegeted theme.

I began with a fundamental critique of postcolonial biblical criticism. Despite the sustained emphasis on identity dimensions in postcolonial theory, postcolonial *biblical* scholars reading Exodus (and Edward Said) have not exercised the philosophical tools of the postcolonial optic in helpful ways. Ironically, despite excoriating liberationists for reading Exodus selectively through the privileging of limited themes and motifs, postcolonial scholars have fallen into this very trap. Assessments of Exodus in the work of Said, Warrior, Dube, and Yee have painted with a broad brush, oversimplifying the story via a pair of interpretive strategies.

The first tactic has been to place the heroic midwives and wider Canaanite population on one extreme over and against the malicious Pharaoh, princess, and YHWH on the other. The second reading strategy disregards Exodus's narrative of liberation altogether, primarily by prioritizing the extermination of indigenes in Joshua's military campaign. In both appraisals Moses hardly receives attention. He either goes unmentioned or is considered an acquiescent cog in YHWH's tyrannical program to terrorize and dispossess.

In seeking to reimagine the postcolonial dimensions of Exodus, this study began by drawing attention to the Pharaoh's elimination of the liminal Josephesque position through disassociation. This is an ideology of radical xenophobia made manifest in Pharaoh's desire to define human identity under immutable categories of difference and binarism. The midwives' zoological response to Pharaoh's questioning of their failure is a "derivative discourse" which is based in colonial ideology but destabilizes and disorients Pharaonic categories by appropriating and adapting its rules to outwit and therefore frus-

4 According to The Bible and Culture Collective, "To decolonize is, on the one hand, to identify oppressive sociopolitical presence in the text and in the history of its interpretation in the dominant ideology and, on the other hand, to identify the liberating message of the text and the history of interpretations of the text by oppressed readers." George Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995), 284.

trate the aims of empire.⁵ To claim, “They are lively (just like animals)” (Exod 1:19), is to redraw the boundaries of savagery. Additionally, the reply indicates the midwives’ willingness to function fluidly within the colonial web of ambivalence as hybridic figures. Identity as obdurate and inflexible is rejected. If in the Babel tale God comes down to disperse builders, in the Exodus tale it is God’s reverent agents, the midwives, who allow the Israelite dispersal to continue unhindered. Both God and midwives interject to disseminate populations in ways that will add complexity and maintain increase. Thus, Pharaoh’s tactic to capitalize on difference is met and rejected.

In Exod 2:1–10 the clever plot to save the baby is realized with the appearance of the royal daughter. Like the women of Exod 1, the actions of the daughter disorder the fixity of her father’s identity philosophy. Pharaoh’s inflexible notion of identity has not taken root in her. In the princess, we see that among the tragedies of wanton destruction, murder, and violence, there are some who wear the Power’s mantle uncomfortably and work *sub rosa* to assist the disenfranchised in bringing forward life, even if such actions undermine their own authority. In her the empire is humanized.

By putting a face to empire, the example of Pharaoh’s daughter indicates that not all is lost for the oppressor.⁶ Those who most benefit from power can move toward the disempowered. This middle locality is not the sole possession of the downtrodden. Even the colonizer can adopt a hybridic, intra-colonial position. The stories of women in Exod 1:1–2:10 fashion a counter-narrative to Pharaoh’s static and totalizing schemes. In both pericopes (1:1–22; 2:1–10) the development moves away from established and dichotomizing ethnic boundaries, toward those that are destabilized and refracted. The same progression is seen in the story of Moses that occupies the narrative’s attention for the remainder of chapter 2.

The vignette of Moses’s early life arrests the positive momentum created by the stories of the women. Having witnessed abuse (Exod 2:1) Moses’ actions bear the attributes of Egyptian-style hubris and cruelty. Paradoxically, Moses fights for Israelites with the very tools that have created their oppression. Pretentious and presumptuous, he learns that he has assumed too much. As Said has stated of the exile’s experience, the nourishment offered by tradition, family, and geography is closed to Moses.⁷ Moses begins to realize that his assumed Egyptian status has robbed him of voice.

5 See Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 343–345.

6 Pharaoh’s daughter is a forerunner of sorts. She is the first of other Egyptians who will react with reverence in the face of this powerful god, YHWH (see Exod 9:20; 11:3, 8).

7 Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 174.

In the Hebrew respondent's verbal rebuke Moses realizes a pair of troubling truths. First, Moses' Egyptian rank has sabotaged his standing among the Hebrew community. Second, the bold rebuke of his kinsman indicates that Moses does not command the power of voice that comes naturally to Pharaoh and his daughter (Exod 1:10, 22; 2:8). The words of Moses carry no authority. Being neither Hebrew nor Egyptian, Moses cannot speak into, or from, either position. He is neither insider nor outsider but is doubly dislocated. Moses learns that he may not wear the colonial mantle in one instant and doff it in the next. Stupefied, his only solution is to flee.

The renegade Moses concludes the chapter by marrying and naming his son. Here Moses marks a joyous series of events (social inclusion, marriage, childbirth) with an expression of penetrating sadness and displacement. The ravages of his pain are laid bare. "Gershom" is a nadir moment of acute self-awareness and abject self-denial. The name is an expression of rootlessness, for in it Moses discloses his alien and alienated status. He belongs neither to Egypt, nor to the disempowered Hebrews, nor to his Midianite hosts. This triple displacement is intensified in a fourth rejection. Moses feels *himself* adrift. He is torn between his included status as גר (resident alien) and his persistent foreignness (נכרי). By finally speaking his multiple alienations into existence, Moses accepts the verdict of the quarreling Hebrew respondent (Exod 2:14) as true. Moses internalizes his manifold rejection.

In Exod 2:23–25 the narrative pivots away from Moses' despair and toward an emerging hope that will culminate in the giving of God's name (Exod 3:14–15). In the epiphanic appearance of Exod 3, the reader encounters a relational God for whom rootedness in the ancestral narratives is an important marker of identity. Yet Moses cannot align himself with such historical record. His past is a blur of rejection and running. Moses' rhetorical counter "Who am I?" (Exod 3:11) is a statement born of his misaligned and dislodged sense of self.

As detailed in the previous chapter, a postcolonial reading of the revelation's key phrase, אהיה אשר אהיה (Exod 3:14) highlights identity as versatility and perpetual shifting. The name is at once mysterious and immanent, indefinite and accessible. Even God, in solidarity with the Israelite people, shares their dislocated status. The subjected Israelites are not alone. For Moses, feelings of dejection are transformed and recast as elements that comprise the identity of the commissioning deity. On the one hand, God articulates God's own sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity. On the other hand, the name communicates agency and self-determination. God will be who/what/which God will be. Like Moses, YHWH is hybridic and multi-stanced, dwelling in the Third Space.

This revelation functions as an invitation, by which Moses is transformed. The name of God is not a simple moniker, rather, it serves to broker a reassess-

ment and reorientation in Moses. Moses' self-appraisal as one marked by difference is thrown into question. His understanding of difference itself is undergoing a radical reinvention. Moses learns that dislocation (or multi-locality) is tied to God's essential essence and life-saving mission. In YHWH, Moses sees another personality living as a composite. The divine revelation of Exod 2:23–3:15 reframes Moses' sense of self and puts him on the path to self-acceptance. Placed within hybridity, as a celebratory category, difference is now Moses' prized possession. It is a call to own dislocation, indeterminacy, and ambiguity, as virtues.

Moses, therefore, is called to embrace, not the strict rootedness of any one social location, but the fragmentary and muddled reality of his layered lineage in order to form a "double consciousness."⁸ As Sugirtharajah recalls, "The postcolonial notion of hybridity is not about the dissolution of differences but about renegotiating the structure of power built on differences."⁹ To exist in the hybridic space is to traffic within the boundaries *of* difference. The commissioning of Moses is not simply about affecting political liberation for oppressed Hebrews, it is also meant to redeem Moses through a reassessment of what counts as authentic selfhood.

The foregoing has resulted in a reading that is attentive, both, to the text's complexities, and to its often-neglected characters. I have shown that the early stories of Exodus go beyond recounting simplistic origin tales. The opening of Exodus is about existence in the uneasy loci of estrangement and exclusion. The roles of the midwives, the Levite daughter, Pharaoh's daughter, Moses, and ultimately YHWH, form a counterweight to the reified identity politics of the empire under the Pharaoh of Exod 1:8. Pharaoh's collectivist and intransigent identity politics are frustrated by human figures and climactically thwarted in the giving of the divine name.

In sum, I have argued that when read through a postcolonial lens sensitive to hybridity, Exod 1:1–3:15 resists the construction of identity in a rigid fashion. Rather, the text in question promotes the virtues of conceiving identity as a polyvalent, variable reality to be sought after by all parties caught in the dehumanizing discourse of colonial subjugation. This is a text about hybridization in which characters move toward the in-between space situated in the midst of nationalistic extremes. It is here, in the hyphenated space, that identity takes on its most fulsome shape.

8 See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

9 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 191.

This analysis, however, represents an initial exploration as seen through one of manifold possible lenses. Indeed, much work is yet to be done from a veritable myriad of postcolonial localities and positionalities. Exodus remains a text where readers encounter both the promise and problems of several eclectic ideologies and contact zones simultaneously at work and in need of ongoing investigation.

Prospect

Biblical scholars have long-noticed the eclecticism of ideologies represented in the text. For example, Walter Brueggemann reacts against the traditional project to identify a comprehensive theme or motif for First Testament theology (i.e. Eichrodt, von Rad).¹⁰ Following the lead of others (Westermann, Terrien, Hanson, Sanders, Albertz) Brueggemann argues for the construction of First Testament theology that exists in the unresolved tension, or anguish, between what he terms “structures of legitimation” and “the embrace of pain”. The major feature of First Testament theology, he argues, is the tension between these counter-themes. The former represents the “common theology” of an all-powerful God above the fray of human experience and behaving contractually with Israel through covenant, Deuteronomic theology, the prophets, and wisdom. Its ideology represents the dominant status quo interests of the ruling classes. The latter critiques the former because it lacks humanity in its denial of pain. He writes, “It is a system of reality that allows no slippage, no graciousness, no room for failure.”¹¹ Brueggemann’s “embrace of pain” represents an impulse to be free of the constraints placed upon it by common theology’s quid pro quo qualities. It envisions an available God within the fray, seen in lament psalms, the cry for liberation (Exod 2:23–25), and the protest of Moses (Exod 32). It is the intersection of these two agendas that collide against one another in the book of Job. Unlike the urge to maintain the status quo, Job articulates a minority voice that refuses to allow the structures of legitimation to win out.

In a similar vein, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees in the biblical text “kyriarchal inscriptions” serving both Empire and egalitarian trajectories for the sake of women.¹² Mark G. Brett, commenting on postcolonial dimensions in Genesis, sees the book as subtly contesting the dominant Persian imperial aims

10 For full discussion see, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1–44.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 See Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*.

insofar as it contains patterns of ideological incongruity between the inclusiveness of marriage to foreigners among its patriarchs (Hagar, Dinah, Tamar) and the blatant ethnocentricity seen in the need for endogamous marriage in, for instance, Ezra-Nehemiah.¹³

Similarly, Sugirtharajah recognizes this diversity and provides a helpful rubric for spotting discordant voices in the biblical text. Following Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*,¹⁴ Sugirtharajah suggests that the biblical text contains hegemonic, professional, negotiated, and oppositional codes;¹⁵ of which the first and last function as opposites and perhaps are most readily recognizable. The hegemonic code seeks to legitimize and promote the values and ideological interests of the elitist class (e.g. Qohelet's privileged economic focus). The oppositional code slips into the text despite the will of the ruling class. It appears in the voices (or silences) of marginalized characters (e.g. Queen Vashti, Orpah, Shiphra, Puah). It is marked with duplicitous actions that include "keeping secrets or lying, hiding goods, sabotage, and deception."¹⁶

Ashcroft and Griffiths echo this diversity by alerting readers to the popular postcolonial image of a palimpsest. They explain the idea as stemming from the multiple use of parchment in which older inscriptions (we might insert "biblical texts") are overwritten with newer ones. They argue that this process is seldom without residue, leaving behind evidence of prior erasures upon postcolonial literatures. The goal, as Ashcroft and Griffiths explain, is to tease out vestigial traces of the erased history in order to better understand the current one.¹⁷ Joined by Tiffin in an earlier publication, Ashcroft and Griffiths—while not referencing the Bible per se—argue that post-colonial¹⁸ literature employs the textual strategies of abrogation and appropriation. The former means a dismissal of the metropolitan power as it aims to control the means of communication by positing standard categories and the notion of fixed meaning. The latter takes up the language of power but aims to recapture and remold it in new ways that echo the cultural experience of the contemporary person.¹⁹

13 Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000).

14 Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: Centre for Cultural Studies University of Birmingham, 1973).

15 See again, Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 74–102.

16 Ibid., 84. For full discussion of the oppositional code see pages 84–86.

17 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2d ed.; New York: Routledge, 2007), 158–160.

18 They retain the hyphen.

19 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 38–76.

James C. Scott frames these friction points in terms of “hidden transcripts,” by which he refers to the plethora of ideological resistance forms taken up by subaltern people groups.²⁰

Whatever terminology or images are employed to capture this phenomenon; the overarching point seems rather clear. The biblical text does not present a monotone voice from one prevailing ideological locus. Rather, what remains is an eclectic collection of discourses and counter discourses in tension. The Bible testifies to wide-ranging systems of thought. Numerous perspectives and ideologies from different moments of Israel’s history are interlaced to form a single yet elaborate woven tapestry. The book of Exodus is no exception.

Like the biblical corpus ensconcing it, Exodus is a book that houses multiple ideologies, composite characters, and both vast and subtle disparities of power that overlap and overwrite one another. Why these dimensions have not received more attention in postcolonial readings of Exodus is puzzling. As detailed in chapter 2 above, the Said-Warrior-Dube-Yee discussion has tended to polarize Exodus by identifying suppressed characters (midwives and Canaanites) while also denigrating those viewed as malevolent figures (Pharaoh, his daughter, YHWH). While Yee’s discussion comes closest to the mark, her reading paints Egypt coarsely as little more than an object that is defanged through ridicule. This suggests that postcolonial work done in the field provisionally qualifies under the postcolonial moniker.

The future of postcolonial studies in Exodus must resist such reductive impulses as well as refuse to read Exodus hurriedly en route to the conquest narrative. As an optic that mines the multiplicity of discursive entanglements, patterns of thought, and complex interrelationships between those in power, those outside of it, and those embroiled within the continuum established by both poles, the postcolonial approach has more to uncover within Exodus itself.

Contrapuntal Contact Zones in Exodus

When carefully deployed, postcolonial inquiry is well-suited to explore the interplay of Exodus’s multidimensional facets. To this end Edward Said can again be instructive. He conceives the task of critical analysis as one that ought to re-read the great Western works with an eye toward giving voice to disenfranchised characters.²¹ Part of how this is accomplished, Said asserts, is by utilizing his distinctive “contrapuntal” reading strategy outlined above in chapter 1. To

20 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1990).

21 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66.

employ a contrapuntal optic is to account for both the promulgation *of* and hostility *to* imperializing ideologies in a given text.²²

Analogously, a popular parallel in contextual and postcolonial approaches is to characterize texts as double-edged swords.²³ While this image is frank about the collusion of biblical texts with militarization, what Exodus presents might be better captured by enlarging the image from one of a dual-edged sword to that of a mace. That is, texts do not simplistically exhibit two facets to be examined (pro-Empire/anti-Empire). Like a club beset with spikes all around, so the text is comprised of multiple points of impact; multiple contrapuntal collision sites. These various “contact zones” are evident in places where the narrative posits competing discourses and counter-discourses clashing in overt and subtle ways. If as Yee suggests, Exodus congeals as a hybrid text, “not completely consistent and coherent exposition of imperial objectives,”²⁴ then how does the remainder of Exodus simultaneously ameliorate power and communicate a message for the Israelite underclass? How might we search out these alliances? What is the inner discourse of the book? Is Exodus in collusion with Empire, resistant to Empire, or something else?

We recall that postcolonial criticism affirms that texts are never innocent representations from objective disconnected authors. Rather, texts mimic their creator’s or redactor’s social, economic, and religious milieu. As Said has stated, “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.”²⁵ Those who control narrative control knowledge. Where empire is present, narration becomes a site for contestation. Segovia describes this phenomenon as “the shadow of empire” looming over the manufacturing of ancient texts.²⁶ If indeed imperial oversight is a feature of text-making, what then might be the shape of the shadows stretched out over the Exodus narrative? Who might be casting them, and for what reasons?

The task of answering these questions is compounded when one takes into account the multifaceted nature of performing postcolonial inquiry. Such a task means engaging with an enormous, and heterogenous, mixed bag of methods necessary to treat the complex nature of the biblical text and its

22 On the intertwined nature of contrapuntal reading that considers exploiter and exploited ideologies together—for the sake of mutual liberation—see Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 13–36; cf. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66–67.

23 Kirk-Duggan, “Let My People Go!” 262.

24 Yee, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism,” 214.

25 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

26 Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 126.

readership. Nevertheless, a worthwhile goal of any future work on Exodus and postcoloniality cannot afford to ignore these critical questions.

With Saidian sensibilities in mind, what might future postcolonial interpretations of Exodus yield? How might we map the book's contrapuntal codes? How might this text be read from non-traditional angles, with interchangeable "eyes," as it were? The discussion that follows contemplates the shape of what a postcolonial exploration for the remainder of Exodus might yield. Perhaps, additionally, what follows may function as an agenda for postcolonial Exodus studies to come.

Furthering the Identity Investigation

Because the foregoing has addressed Moses' backstory, infancy, and call narrative, a natural starting point is to extend the current study deeper into Exodus. Future projects might continue to employ postcolonialism's analytical concept of hybridity to trace the development of Mosaic identity as an internal contact zone. Operative questions might include: What becomes of Moses' sense of self as he faces Pharaoh, leads the migration, delivers the law, and prepares for YHWH's arrival? How does Moses' still-forming selfhood evolve, mature, and expand as he returns to Egypt, the place of his fractious past and fractured present? What implications persist for Moses, whose status as a never-prosecuted fugitive and murderer never comes under question. How can Moses, the hero of the liberation story, later espouse ethical demands when he is himself indicted by God's own words (Exod 20:13; 21:12–14)? How does Moses represent justice and arbitrate cases (Exod 18:13–27) as a never-prosecuted criminal? The larger question is, perhaps, how can a postcolonial inquiry that values liminal and oppressed figures ally with Moses without also condoning unlawful interpersonal violence as a viable mode for accomplishing liberation?

What does Moses go on to discover after several theophanic encounters with YHWH? Do those encounters reaffirm the discoveries of the burning bush experience? What, if any, novel insights does Moses realize about himself and his God? To this end, of critical importance is the chapter 32 dialogue between Moses and YHWH. Having been instructed to descend the mountain, Moses objects to YHWH's plan of annihilation by engaging God on the basis of reasonableness, reputation, and remembrance (32:30; cf. 33:15–17). Moses' utterance of "perhaps" (אוֹלֵי), one might argue, reflects his climactic discovery in Exod 3:14. Thus, Exodus might again be showing that Moses has grown to understand, even to rely on, YHWH's manifold openness, freedom, and fluidity.

Similar questions may be asked of YHWH. What development can we detect in God's persona? Does YHWH remain within the hyphenated space to which Moses has been called? Evidence to the affirmative may be found in several

episodes. The ethereal images used to represent the divine (fire, smoke, dense cloud; see Exod 19) extend the theme of ambiguity introduced by the burning bush scene. Likewise, one must note the prohibition against centralizing worship captured in the instructions to form the altar of unhewn stones (Exod 20:22–26), along with the book's climactic description of YHWH as transient and mobile in the tabernacle complex (Exod 40:34–38), as evocative of ambiguity. So also, YHWH's willingness to revise a predetermined decision (Exod 32:14) is an echo of divine pliability. Together, these elements preserve YHWH's commitment to impermanence and flexibility, thus bolstering the adaptive nature of selfhood advanced in this postcolonial reading.

And yet, the concept of identity itself may be numbered among the contrapuntal contact zones of Exodus. We recall that the book goes on to catalog the way in which YHWH, with Moses' help and cooperation, establishes bureaucratic rule which features legal standards, judicial practices, and religious protocols. Is YHWH's call for the building of the ark and its housing, complete with the lavish trappings of precious materials (Exod 25:1 ff.), a reflection of imperial culture? Is the anti-imperial nature of Exodus compromised by these requirements? What of Moses' own participation in this regard? We must call to mind that in the remainder of Exodus Moses functions as the chief architect of YHWH's concentration of rule. Does Moses' identity, in the end, remain that of a social/cultural intra-colonial hybrid? Or does his executive administrative role move him more decidedly in the direction of imperial government? Does Exodus exchange one empire for another?

Another goal of an expanded postcolonial study of Exodus might be to move beyond the protagonists, giving greater consideration to contact zones faced by the full ensemble of supporting characters. Aaron is a suitable figure for consideration. He, perhaps unlike any other figure, is profoundly circumscribed by his liminal status. The text of Exodus tells us from the outset that he has already taken part in a private encounter with YHWH, who has directed him on his own journey (Exod 4:14, 27–28). As the principal co-laborer with Moses in the liberating mission, Aaron undertakes his own identity pilgrimage. Unlike Moses, however, he exists from start to finish in the volatility of the hyphenated space.

Clues to his liminality abound. Aaron's role is first introduced as that of solution to Mosaic objections. Moses' speech deficiencies will be redressed by Aaron's eloquence. Aaron's ability to speak will link Moses with the people, thus completing the connection between YHWH and the populace (Exod 4:14–16). He will function as a prophet for Moses (Exod 7:1), speak in the Israelite assembly (Exod 4:30), speak in the presence of Pharaoh (Exod 5:1; 7:2), and perform signs (Exod 7:9–10; 19–20; 8:6). So prominent is Aaron's role that in one instance the biblical author lists Aaron ahead of Moses, inverting their typical

order (Exod 6:26) and bracketing 6:26–27 chiastically with his name. As the story unfolds we encounter Aaron communicating in the place of Moses (Exod 16:9–10), with Hur upholding Moses' arms in battle (Exod 17:12), functioning as guilty party in the place of Israel (Exod 28:30, 38), serving with his family as a perpetual priesthood (Exod 28:1ff.; 29:29–30; 44), and maneuvering—albeit uncomfortably—between people and piety in Exod 32.

Careful readers will notice his intermediary role in the golden calf episode as that of a conduit, leading both away and towards YHWH. In one direction Aaron assists the people by demanding raw material (Exod 32:2) and crafting the object of their affections, the golden calf (Exod 32:4). In another direction, his divided loyalties are plainly evident. The calf's making is followed swiftly by Aaron's attempt to re-orient the cultic activity as unto YHWH by erecting an altar and calling for an impromptu festival (Exod 32:5). Aaron is not merely a typologically apostate figure. He makes a way, in light of challenges, to assist in the worship of YHWH, however perverse. His narrative is one that locates him, uniquely in the Third Space from beginning to end.

Applying postcolonial identity criteria might also illuminate Zipporah, a figure occupying her own unique space of tension. Zipporah's quick-witted intervention (Exod 4:25–26) bears striking resemblance to that which we have already seen in the women of Exod 2. In the wake of Moses' commissioning, the resourceful and courageous Zipporah undertakes an intercessory role between YHWH and Moses to spare her husband's life and preserve the nascent liberating mission. She embodies counter-cultural resourcefulness and courage in the face of grave circumstances. Her bravery is again underscored by her birthing of Eliezer, whom Moses names to reflect God's salvation (Exod 18:4). Beset with turmoil, uncertainty, migration, and the threat of the empire's hostility, Zipporah both preserves and authors life.

In one direction, a contrapuntal reading creates a fresh awareness and appreciation of the interpersonal dimensions and development of female characters who, like Zipporah, endure as life-sustaining and mediating intra-colonial agents. However, as the story wears on beyond the opening chapters, the roles of women become diffused as Moses and his male cohort (Aaron, Joshua, elders, et al.) step into the foreground. The obscuring of women finds emphasis in several prominent instances. For example, the narrator's use of "the people" (העם) in Exod 19:15 means only male Hebrews, since the instruction is to avoid sexual intercourse with women. So also, the Decalogue is addressed to wealthy, land and slave-owning males who possess wives (Exod 20:17; cf. 22:16–17). The prophet Miriam is another example of this dissipation. Her musical leadership at the sea punctuates the ultimate defeat of Pharaoh. What began with the leadership of defiant women working for the salvation of Israel and Moses, ends

with the leadership of women in celebration (Exod 15:20–21). And yet, Miriam is never to appear in Exodus beyond her song. Likewise, Zipporah is herself relegated to the edges of the narrative in what follows. Named only once beyond chapter 4 (Exod 18:2), she is thereafter titled only in connection with her husband as “wife.” Most troublingly, Zipporah is made invisible in the passionate greeting and ensuing conversation between Moses and Jethro (Exod 18:7). This is a meeting between adult males. Zipporah and her children look on in silence.

Given these examples, can the roles of female figures (perhaps of women in Exodus more generally) be seen as actually serving patriarchal and imperial concerns in the end? How might postcolonial concerns read the named and unnamed women of Exodus? Are they to be regarded co-agents of liberation? Are they to be dismissed characters ultimately obfuscated by an androcentric agenda? Or perhaps there is still another way to understand their roles as occupying a middle space of inter-subjectivity.

When taken as a whole, how does Exodus view identity as Otherness? In one direction, Exodus promotes freedom from oppression, the condemnation of human suffering at the hands of taskmasters, and the proper treatment of the *גֵּר*. Much of Exodus (and Deuteronomy) presents legal material designed largely to resist the impulse to recreate imperialism, often through proper remembrance of slavery and directives to treat the marginalized trio of the resident alien, orphan, and widow with kindness (22:21–27; 23:6–11, 12; cf. Deut 24:17–22). A contrapuntal postcolonial optic, however, will detect discordant impulses. For instance, the narrative assumes Israel’s participation in enslavement practices (Exod 20:10) and later offers direct instructions for its administration (Exod 21:2–11). So also, Exodus contains an inclination toward isolationism (Exod 23:31–33), the condemnation of exogamous marriage (Exod 34:15–16; cf. Deut 7:3–4), and may also be said to present *גֵּרִים* as mere cogs serving the burgeoning Israelite colonial machine. What should readers make of this? Do the colonial entanglements of the Exodus identity narrative, for both individuals and groups, resist or reinscribe the aims of empire? Is identity in Exodus meant to somehow subvert the reifying tendencies of empire? Or is the identity ideology operating in yet other unique ways?

Diaspora Hermeneutics

Closely related to the character studies outlined above is the complimentary postcolonial field of diaspora biblical hermeneutics, which has much to offer future work in Exodus.²⁷ Sugirtharajah traces the term’s basic definition as

27 Notably, see Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 179–199; cf.

once being dominated by territoriality. Now, however, diaspora is not simply about land. Diaspora “is about the ambivalences and contradictions of being at home in many places, and among many peoples and many experiences” signifying “the formation of identities based on diversity and difference and is not necessarily seen in terms of reconnecting with a reverential notion of homeland.”²⁸

Naturally, the group of greatest interest is that of the Israelite masses. We might begin by inquiring about the makeup of the “Israelite” exodus group, recalling the glancing note about Israel’s neighborly proximity to Egyptians (Exod 11:2), coupled with the rather curious note about the co-travelers as a “mixed multitude” (Exod 12:38; cf. Num 11:4). Together these indicate that the earliest group of migrants were already a heterogeneous ethnic and socio-cultural composite. Exodus, it would seem, contains (at least in part) a thematic thread that proffers a rather fluid, diasporic, opinion of belonging that again resists Pharaoh’s exclusivist rhetoric. Whatever the precise constitution of the exodus group, these are people in every way living within a space fraught with the psychological mutilations and implications of transitional experience. Theirs is a story of journeying, not merely geographically, but also psychosocially.

The tale sees Israelites relocate away from both material and abstract realities. The former is clearly evinced throughout. The people themselves argue the case, lamenting that the voyage into the wilderness has divested them of certain guaranteed goods. The security offered by the resources and provisions of the empire’s fleshpots and bread are no more (Exod 16:3). The lasting assurances of life in Egypt are replaced with perishing daily provisions and the

Fernando F. Segovia, “Melting and Dreaming in America: Visions and Re-visions,” in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins* (ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia; Eugene Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 228–268; Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); Segovia, “Towards a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement,” in *Reading from This Place Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 57–74; Segovia, “Toward Intercultural Criticism: A Reading Strategy from the Diaspora,” in *Reading from This Place Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 303–330.

28 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 184; cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 217–218; on the multiple meanings of diaspora, see Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997); on the concept of home see McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 240–247 on the concept of home.

promise of a distant, and still-imagined, land. Second, and perhaps more profound than the experience of bodily vulnerability, the exodus population also suffers the effects of cognitive migration. Their psychological journey is from the known social, cultural, and religious world of Egypt, to one that exists in the abstract and has been singularly pledged through the mediating duo of Moses and Aaron. The peoples' transition moves from that of an established cultural heritage—albeit adopted—to a forgotten one (Exod 3:6, 15–16). The effects of this rootlessness are significant. Collective selfhood is under negotiation.

A supplemental investigation germane to a study of Israelite psychological diaspora might proceed by teasing out the leitmotif of belonging, with its attendant theological implications. Such a study may reveal a taut dialectic between possession and disassociation. Exod 5 is illustrative of this theme. In the midst of rejecting Moses and Aaron's first request, Pharaoh draws a sharp distinction between the Israelites and "the people of the land" (Exod 5:5; cf. 12:31).²⁹ Israelites are not his. For their part, the Israelite supervisors resist Pharaoh's dissociation by thrice declaring the existence of a subject-master bond (Exod 5:15–16). The Israelite masses punctuate the point, declaring themselves to be Pharaoh's "own people" (Exod 5:16). Yet in the chapter's concluding clause Moses asserts that possession of the people falls only to YHWH (Exod 5:23). The effect of the chapter is to correct the wayward thinking of the Israelite leadership. Perhaps Israelite thinking is in the process of evolution. Perhaps Israelites are in the throes of confusion. Whatever the case, the strain of chapter 5 is emblematic of tension elsewhere.

At times YHWH's ownership of the people is unquestioned (Exod 6:7–8; 7:4; 9:17). YHWH underscores that they are distinctive, occupying the unique territory of Goshen (Exod 8:22–23; 9:4, 6–7, 26; 10:23; 11:7) and spared the deaths of firstborns by virtue of the unique lintel marking (Exod 12:22–23). Israelite uniqueness is galvanized throughout Exodus by virtue of consistent injunctions to pass on the remembrance of the exodus event to future generations (Exod 10:2; 12:42; 13:14). Likewise, Israelite identity is affirmed and upheld by calls for perpetual festival observances. As examples, the establishing of the Passover and festival of unleavened bread (Exod 12; cf. 23:14–15; 34:18), the consecration of the first born (Exod 13), the requirement to maintain an omer of manna (Exod 16:32–34), the sabbath day observance (Exod 20:8–11), the festival of harvest (Exod 23:16a), the festival of ingathering (Exod 23:16b), and festival of weeks (Exod 34:22), all function to fashion the Israelite self. However, at other

29 This reading, following NRSV, relies on the Samaritan Hebrew text.

times possession of the people is replaced with disassociation. The dialogue between Moses and YHWH that follows the golden calf scene demonstrates this friction. YHWH's disowning of both the people and YHWH's own acts of liberation (Exod 32:7), are rebuffed by an insistent Moses. According to him, the people *do* belong to YHWH, as do YHWH's liberating activities (Exod 32:11–13; cf. 33:13). Even the historical lineage of this people belongs wholly to YHWH (Exod 32:13).

What is the impact of these ambivalences on the still-forming Israelite national psyche? How do these vacillations form another kind of inward journey for the externally-travelling Israelites? What responsibility should YHWH accept for the fragmented development of the Israelite self?

A diaspora biblical hermeneutic may also be undertaken on behalf of the Egyptian populace. What effects of diaspora linger for those who remain at home? How do the Egyptians come to terms with the loss of their neighbors? What social and cultural richness is forfeited as a result of the Israelite migration? How can Egyptian selfhood reframe itself after the loss of livestock and crops? How can the loss of identity and lineage recover after the traumatic loss of firstborn sons? What reassessment of nationhood results in the wake of such penetrating national and interpersonal divestitures? How do Egyptians suffer as victims in their own right? How is the meaning of “home” now reframed? What kind of psychological “movement” do Egyptians endure?

Contemporary groups uprooted by conflict, willing emigrants hopeful for greater opportunities abroad, or those living out the distinctive aftermath of staying home, may discover in Exodus valuable tools. Diasporic populations en route to new futures in new lands or those impacted by the effects of acute displacement may engage with the language of Exodus, finding in its pages a useful narrative for articulating the fraught-filled experience of being simultaneously homed and unhomed.³⁰ Postcolonial investigations of this kind may assist Exodus to emerge, not merely as a story of socio-political liberation for Iron age Israelites, but as a text that carries promise for refugee communities facing issues of global dislocation, migrancy, and the recent re-ignition of xenophobia in our present world.

The Persian Shadow

As introduced in chapter 2's analysis of Gale Yee's work, another trajectory for future efforts in Exodus reflects the promising rise of Persian-period studies. This area of inquiry begins by recognizing that the biblical text is deeply

30 For an early example of such a reading, see Fernandez, “Exodus-toward-Egypt,” 242–257.

marked, both, by the presence of Persia,³¹ whose empire exerted potent social, cultural, economic, and political power, and by Israel's experience of exile under Persian rule. According to leading proponents,³² the Persian Empire (539–332 BCE), perhaps more than any other, is responsible for deeply impacting the Yehudite colony. In light of Israel's catastrophic experience of exile, it then theorizes the role of imperial oversight as participating in the acts of producing, redacting, and endorsing the construction of the Hebrew scriptures to meet the needs of colonizing and colonized groups.³³ It was under the auspices of Persian domination, so it is argued, that the Torah underwent its most significant literary development.³⁴ The canon and the process that led to its establishment, therefore, form yet another contact zone. An investigation of the politics of canonization, as pertaining to Exodus, may be undertaken following Sugirtharajah's aforementioned identification of hegemonic and oppositional codes.³⁵

The oppositional code articulates the protest voice of the colonized as they carefully maneuver in the shadow of empire. This code is meant to posit intra-colonial survival strategies for conquered Judean masses, which consists of imperial agents returned from captivity and local peasantry never exiled. The

31 Notably, see Isa 44:28–45:7, Dan 6, Esth, Ezr-Neh, among other prominent texts.

32 Notably, Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow; Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. John L. Berquist; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Peter Frei, "Persian Imperial Authorization: A Summary," in *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch* (ed. James W. Watts; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 5–40; Richard A. Horsley, "The Origins of the Hebrew Scriptures in Imperial Relations," in *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 107–134; Jon L. Berquist and Alice Hunt, eds., *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial Nature of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods* (New York: T & T Clark, 2012); cf. Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

33 For example, Jon L. Berquist identifies the process of canonization to be the result of both imperialist ideology and the product of colonized administrators precariously perched between extremes. He writes, "The canon is part of a mediation between colonizer and colonized, but it is a troubled mediation, not a smooth dialectic synthesis." "Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization," 92; cf. Yee, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 210–214.

34 The theory of Persian imperial oversight is not without controversy. Critics have serious misgivings about the nature, scope, and efficacy of Persian political domination in the postexilic period. See James W. Watts, ed., *Persia and Torah: The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

35 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 74–102. See further, Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding*, 1973.

psychological needs of the underclass to exist and survive with dignity in the face of empire are expressed, for example, in the story of the midwives' and Levite mother's astute defiance. The needs of returning elites are echoed in the story through Moses, who undergoes his own exile and reaches Egypt authorized, authenticated, and ready to realize God's plan. As a byproduct, the oppositional code can also be instructive for Persia if one reads Egypt as a cipher for Persia and other would-be empires. Meant as a warning, Persia is to realize the revolutionary potential of its subject people. Unless they are managed humanely, rebellion and disaster will ensue.

While this code accomplishes different results for its dual constituents (Persia and Israel), it is united in one crucial area. For both groups the oppositional code criticizes Egypt's rigid conception of human identity, thus advancing the notion of human heterogeneity as a necessary ontology for the purposes of group survival. Both foci are imbued with pedagogical aims. Rhetorically, the text compels its audiences to receive vital instruction. The Persians (and all would-be empires) learn that Egyptian-style dehumanization will have disastrous consequences. Israel learns the tactics by which to endure as intra-colonial, rather than as anti-colonial, agents.

While the authorizing Persian imperium no doubt senses the oppositional dimensions in the Exodus story, it may have permitted its production by reading the tale through a more political and administrative lens befitting *their own* hegemonic interests.³⁶ Envisioned within the imperial context of the Persian-period, the hegemonic code endorses the role of powered Persian overseers. When read through this prism, the Persians might have read the Exodus stories as more a critique of Egyptian society recently conquered (525 BCE), than as a national epic of a small and powerless backwater people.

Reading as Persia illuminates a subtle invective that vilifies Egypt and critiques its ineptitude. Examples from a Persian reading position abound. We recall that the hard-nosed identity politics of Pharaoh are immediately met with resistance by the midwives of Exod 1. Those tasked with vital jobs are quick to turn on the ruling elite in a way that challenges privately and mocks openly.

36 Against the positivistic revisionism of pro-Persian bias as high-minded religious tolerance by ancient and traditional historians, Mary Joan Winn Leith warns against Eurocentric appraisals that ascribe to the Indo-European Persians civility, and barbarism to the Semitic Assyrian and Babylonians. She notes that respect for foreign religions and occupied people was not the only motivating factor for Persia. The Empire was also motivated by "enlightened self-interest" which was at times abusive as well as tolerant. Mary Joan Winn Leith, "Israel among the Nations: The Persian Period," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford, 1998), 285.

Egypt's wayward administrative practices engender protest. The Persian ruler Cambyses (530–522 BCE), therefore, styled himself as a rehabilitator of a misruled Egypt in need of restoration, and so like his father Cyrus (559–530 BCE), he was beholden to “culturally informed flexibility”.³⁷

The ingenuity of the Levite woman and her daughter offer further evidence of the hegemonic code. Faced with impossible circumstances, the oppressed will devise ways to rebel. The bifurcating identity politics of Pharaoh are so entirely corrosive that even the ruling elite within his own household find ways to join the furtive revolt. The triple rejection of Moses that ensues would indicate the chaos that results from poor administrative policies as affecting not only communities, but individuals as well. The social disorder felt by the community is matched by the sad tale of Moses' internal turmoil. Finally, the result of disrespectful imperial administration has cosmic consequences as well. The story of the sentient and calling deity indicates that when threatened, even a people's god will author resistance.

That the Egyptian enemy is portrayed unfavorably for their hubris, ethnocentricity, and mis-administration of a subject people serves Persian political purposes in a challenging time. We recall that Egypt remains a place of concern for Persia in the postexilic period. The Inarus-led Egyptian revolt (460 BCE) and its subjugation under the Persian general Megabyzus (456 BCE) was swiftly followed by Artaxerxes's sending of Ezra back to the borderland to ameliorate the Jews living in the shadow of the dangerous and capable Egyptians.³⁸ As a soft polemic, reading for the hegemonic code casts Egypt in the mold of self-destructive and governmentally incompetent political relics. The stories of Exodus reinforce Persian style of governance by offering an explanation for Persian dominance over and against the monolithic, outdated, and corrosive governing tactics of the Egyptians. Moreover, by cataloging the downfall of the Exodus Pharaoh, the tale buttresses the Persian imperial practice of allowing for self-governance, however limited.

While the oppositional code manifests as a didactic³⁹ instrument for Israel and a subtle warning to Persia, the hegemonic code serves as a cautionary tale that simultaneously cements Persian identity and legitimizes its strategies of imperial administration. The message to insiders would be clear. The Egyptians created an untenable political position by crafting identity as unidirectional and monolithic. Persia, on the other hand, has nothing to fear. Persian respect

37 Ibid., 292.

38 F. Charles Fensham, “Ezra, The Book of,” *OC* 220.

39 For a discussion of didacticism in Exodus see Kåre Berge, “Didacticism in Exodus? Elements of Didactic Genre in Exodus 1–15,” *SJOT* 22 (2008): 3–28.

for local practices means that this Israelite God would have no reason to incite revolution. If worshipers are allowed to maintain a modicum of independence, the kingdom will survive without incident. Thus, the ideological needs of the authorizing Persian ruling classes are served by enumerating the features of wayward empire (Egypt), championing those of proper empire (Persia), and placating those in the middle by allowing for their limited autonomy (Israel).

Conclusion

Postcolonial biblical scholarship of Exodus has been content to address the deficiencies of traditional mainstream readings. To be sure, this is a worthy and needed start. However, the long-term effectiveness of postcolonial scholarship in Exodus will be gauged, not by how it details interpretive shortcomings, but in the ways postcolonialists continue to open wide the book's interpretive doors to multiple readings and complexities.

Said, reflecting on the impact of his work in the 25th anniversary edition's preface to *Orientalism*, describes the role of the intellectual as one meant to:

complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and collective passion ... Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority.⁴⁰

Indeed, future postcolonial readings of Exodus will prove useful if they maintain Said's broadening emphasis.

This study has sought to model a more expansive reading of Exodus, that complements the work of traditional scholarship, by employing a contrapuntal sensitivity to colonial, anticolonial, intra-colonial, and other impulses found in its discourse. In the final analysis, a postcolonial reading of the Bible does not represent a hermeneutical silver-bullet. Much is yet to be learned by refusing to resolve ambivalences, and by searching out more silenced voices and themes. Rather, postcolonial criticism offers a strategy for maintaining interpretive mixture by remaining unafraid to engage neglected themes and characters at the fringes—the contact zones—of the biblical story.

40 Edward W. Said, preface to *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), xxiii.

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